Diversifying the police through the tenets of intergroup contact theory

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Introduction

Despite years of protests, bias in policing continues to be a controversial social issue in the US (Pew Reseach Center, 2023). As such, law enforcement agencies have been called to change their practices and policies, many of which have disproportionately affected minority communities. One common solution adopted by police departments involves diversifying their ranks—an approach that is rooted in the belief that having more officers of color could mitigate racial tensions (Peyton et al., 2022). Although this strategy is associated with some positive outcomes (Ba et al., 2021), it is not without its challenges. Simply increasing diversity does not guarantee that officers will interact seamlessly with each other or their community members. In this article, we use intergroup contact theory as a framework through which to identify the obstacles that may arise within police departments seeking to diversify their units. Our goal is ultimately to provide empirically based suggestions to help overcome these challenges and promote the thoughtful application of social and organizational psychology to policing.

Intergroup contact theory in the context of policing

A large body of psychological research has shown that prejudice can be reduced through intergroup contact (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). In fact, early support for *intergroup contact theory* emerged from a Philadelphia police department, where White officers expressed more positive attitudes and behaviors toward Black officers who had worked with them compared to White peers who did not have such contact (Kephart, 1957). Similar findings continue to emerge in law enforcement, with positive contact predicting residents' attitudes toward police (Peyton et al., 2019), perceptions of police violence (Hayward et al., 2017), and willingness to cooperate (Viki et al., 2006). Importantly, positive intergroup effects are most likely to emerge under certain conditions, specifically when contact occurs between groups of (1) *equal status* who have (2) *cooperative interdependence,* are working toward a (3) *common goal*, and have (4) *institutional support* (Allport, 1954). These factors can attenuate bias by increasing knowledge about others, enhancing empathy and perspective-taking, and reducing intergroup anxiety (Tausch and Hewstone, 2010). Below, we consider each of the four optimal conditions within the context of police departments and identify ways in which these hurdles can be overcome for diversity to thrive.

Equal status

Equal status can be understood as perceptions of power within a situation. In other words, groups that come into contact should feel that they are on equal standing. However, the lack of diversity in police departments poses a challenge, as the high representation of White (76%) male (86%) officers creates a numerical majority that possesses power (Dhanani et al., 2022). The problem may be further compounded by the hierarchical structure of law enforcement agencies and social hierarchies of race and gender (Grusky, 1994). Strategies to diversify the police workforce should therefore consider the power dynamics that exist between high (e.g., White men) and low status (e.g., people of color, women) groups, especially since these status differences can moderate contact effects (Henry and Hardin, 2006).

To this end, policing organizations should ensure that recruitment and selection procedures do not inadvertently exacerbate inequality. First, we caution against superficial efforts that seek to hire only a few minority applicants, a practice which could result in individuals being "tokenized" (Stroshine and Brandl, 2011). Tokenism tends to heighten the visibility of minority members, exaggerates small group differences, and leads to more stereotypical perceptions (Kanter, 1977). In turn, these detrimental effects can generate performance pressure, produce arbitrary boundaries and role restrictions, and contribute to a climate of inequity (King et al., 2010). Conversely, selection procedures that seek to dramatically diversify police departments through quota-based affirmative action approaches—such as those associated with consent decrees—also risk minority hires experiencing a "stigma of incompetence," while providing self-esteem boosts for White men (Leslie et al., 2014; Unzueta et al., 2008).

Perceptions of policing itself may also sustain and heighten the presence of status differences. As a traditionally masculine occupation with a racialized history, policing may be perceived as incongruent with stereotypes about women and people of color. Such assumptions are likely to translate to expectations that these officers are ill-suited for the job, resulting in reduced perceptions of competence and status (Brescoll et al., 2010). Thus, to facilitate equal status between groups in police organizations, it may be necessary to examine how the role of police officer is defined and perceived. For example, research has demonstrated that including traditionally feminine characteristics in professional prototypes of male-dominated occupations (e.g., compassion in firefighting) increases the perceived value of women in the profession (Danbold and Bendersky, 2020). Similarly, efforts to foster a service-minded police force that values social skills and empathy can counter the perception that some officers have lesser status (Bloksgaard and Prieur, 2021).

Cooperative interdependence

Sherif (1961)'s classic Robber's Cave Study on intergroup conflict demonstrated the importance of cooperative interdependence. After developing an attachment to their ingroup at a summer camp, boys were introduced to an outgroup that quickly became their rivals through competition. Their prejudice for each other only dissipated after positive intergroup contact that involved working together, a process that can also elicit group-based gratitude and reciprocity (Rambaud et al., 2021).

Certainly, teamwork is critical to the success of police departments, as officers that work well together can increase their safety, improve communication, boost morale, and provide support to carry out their duties more effectively (Bergner, 1997). However, officers may also experience a heightened sense of competition through the structural and reward systems that are in place. Recent work on masculinity contest cultures in policing organizations points to several ways in which *dog-eat-dog* competition prevails in law enforcement, with officers describing conflict between junior and senior staff and an adversarial promotion process (Workman-Stark, 2021). Competition may even occur within the communities they are assigned to serve, with officers often feeling a sense of "us" vs. "them" which motivates them to protect the thin blue line (Dhanani et al., 2022).

As police forces move toward more representation, such efforts can fail if diversity is not integrated within an inclusive and equitable space that reduces competition. Procedural justice offers one path for fostering cooperation among police officers and community members. Research suggests that receiving fair treatment from authorities through voice, neutrality, and respect both enhances legitimacy and conveys information about one's standing in society, thus heightening cooperative behavior (Tyler and Blader, 2003). Indeed, training officers on the components of procedural justice has shown promise, with studies demonstrating improved resident attitudes and reductions in crimes and arrests (Weisburd et al., 2022). It is important to note, however, that a reliance on training alone can backfire when targeting competitive cultures in law enforcement (Rawski and Workman-Stark, 2018). Thus, efforts should focus not only on training, but also on changes that alter the procedural justice climate of police departments (Trinkner et al., 2016; Tyler, 2024).

Common goals

Individuals working toward a common goal can experience the benefits of intergroup contact (Aronson, 2002; Rico et al., 2012). For instance, players on sports teams can overlook their differences and become more cohesive when they are committed to their superordinate goal of winning. The *Common Ingroup Identity Model* has also shown strong empirical evidence for reducing intergroup prejudice by transforming "us" and "them" into "we" through cooperative interactions that are driven by shared goals (Gaertner et al., 1993).

In the context of policing, it is important to ask whether police officers share a common goal. For instance, do they strive to serve and protect the public, or to uphold the law at all costs? We acknowledge that these two are not the sole goals of police departments, nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive. However, the pattern of racialized policing at least suggests that goals are often fluid and context dependent. For example, patrolling high crime neighborhoods can trigger safety concerns among officers, just as racial stereotypes can be automatically activated under conditions of fear and fatigue to influence shooting decisions (Correll et al.,

2014). Moreover, goals may differ for women and officers of color, who can struggle internally with their personal and professional identities (Headley, 2022). Given that minority groups have greater distrust of law enforcement (Tyler, 2001), Black and Latino officers must combat the negative stigma of being a "traitor" or "sell-out." Thus, departments that diversify themselves should consider the wide range of lived experiences and beliefs that are also being brought in rather than assume that all officers are on the same page about their goals.

Job analyses may prove fruitful to outline police work and examine shared or discrepant understanding of officers' duties (Landy and Vasey, 1991; Mullins and Kimbrough, 1988). Additionally, job analyses can help reveal which values and characteristics are most predictive of problematic and desirable police actions. For example, the excessive use of force is linked to greater support for social hierarchies (Swencionis et al., 2021), whereas compassion has been associated with more cooperative and empathic behavioral expressions (Mercadillo et al., 2014). Despite their popularity, the Big 5 personality traits of conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and extraversion have not been found to reliably predict police performance (Sanders, 2008). Job analyses can therefore reduce the potential for assumptions to guide the selection process and clarify which goals and beliefs would best help diversity thrive in law enforcement.

Institutional support

Lastly, intergroup contact effects are dependent on groups having support from social and institutional authorities. When outgroups believe that positive contact between them is sanctioned and encouraged by those in power, they are more likely to reap its benefits (Landis et al., 1984). However, leadership may be resistant to changing systems that have traditionally empowered them, especially in law enforcement. Research suggests that police can maintain group-based hierarchies by appealing to, selecting, and promoting individuals who hold strong social dominance attitudes (Sidanius et al., 2004). Furthermore, the motivation to maintain the status quo may also be strong within low-status groups, even to their detriment (Jost and Hunyady, 2003).

Some research has paradoxically shown that increases in the presence of Black officers can result in increased racial profiling—an effect that is likely explained by the pressure to act "blue over black" (Wilkins and Williams, 2008). Rather than serving as a catalyst for fostering positive intergroup attitudes and behavior, contact without adequate institutional support can instead place the onus on minority group members to conform and reinforce prejudicial attitudes (Reimer and Sengupta, 2023). Without substantial changes to policies, socialization processes, and leadership buy-in, the potential benefits offered by greater diversity are likely to be superseded by the norms and values that are codified into police culture.

To institutionally support their units, police chiefs must consider professional development programs that go beyond implicit bias. Although these trainings are popular, trying to change internal attitudes or culturally-held beliefs is less likely to be successful than targeting specific behaviors (Lai and Lisnek, 2023). Institutions can instead emphasize skills training that has been shown to reduce racial disparities in shooting decisions and stop and search behaviors (Pryor et al., 2020). Because officers are more likely to be influenced by supervisor expectations than community responsibilities (Ishoy, 2016), it is also imperative that departments create a sense of accountability among their peers. One training intervention known as Ethical Policing is Courageous (EPIC, 2024) has shown early potential, with New Orleans officers learning how to prevent police misconduct before it happens (https://epic.nola.gov/home/). Its goal is to change law enforcement culture by redefining what it means to be loyal and empowering officers to police one another.

Conclusion

Past research shows that diversity alone may not be sufficient for producing long-term changes in organizational culture and performance (Eagly, 2016). We therefore caution against superficial attempts to diversify law enforcement agencies without other systemic changes and emphasize the need to implement strategies in tandem with one another. We outlined how diversity efforts may find greater success when police organizations consider the four "optimal" conditions of intergroup contact theory: *equal status*, *cooperative interdependence*, *common goals*, and *institutional support*. We are optimistic about the promise these approaches have for enacting change in the broader legal system.

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Conflict of interest

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