

Improving Law Enforcement Cross Cultural Competencies through Continued Education

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Abstract

Over the last thirty years Community Oriented Policing (COP) has spawned advancements in creating community partnerships with law enforcement agencies. Agencies that focus on such partnerships have served to reduce crime and resolve conflict. However, community opinions towards law enforcement have become increasingly negative due to recent civil disturbances throughout the United States. Multiculturalism is rapidly expanding within our American communities. The lack of cross-cultural leadership has lent to increased societal conflict. Within law enforcement agencies, annual continued education in the effective interaction and communication with citizens from diverse backgrounds is increasingly necessary. Agencies who form partnerships with educational institutions create opportunities for annual education on cross-cultural leadership. Annual continued education for law enforcement in critical thinking creates opportunities for improved professional self-regulation, decision-making, problem solving and proper analysis of various plausible outcomes. Annual continued education geared towards interpersonal skills creates opportunities for increased communication, enhanced community rapport, and improved potential for de-escalation of hostile events.

Keywords: criminal justice, community, education, critical thinking, interpersonal skills

1. Introduction

Community opinions towards law enforcement are changing (Hudson, 2014). Law enforcement officers are experiencing greater challenges within their communities as a result of the growth of multiculturalism. De-escalation of events may be achieved if officers are educated to effectively relate to the diverse members of their communities (Williams, 2012). With the growing multicultural population in the United States, substantive training is not enough (Vodde, 2009).

Societal changes have increased the need for training for law enforcement in “soft” skill competencies. As the roles of police organizations evolve from the singular role of agencies of law enforcement to include community partners and advocates, law enforcement requires the new skills and educational opportunities to develop these competencies. Such soft skills needed in community policing include interpersonal communications, decision-making skills and problem-solving approaches. Besides upholding social order, law enforcement is asked to be proactive, to build community relationships, to effectively address problems, and to access resources by utilizing a problem solving process (McDermott & Hulse, 2012). Education in critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills will allow officers the ability to de-escalate and improve decision-making by challenging officers to question their assumptions and biases (Safi & Burell, 2007).

2. Rationale

The purpose of the article is to identify the importance of bringing contemporary officer training and education to today’s police force, in order to address the complexities of today’s diverse society. Today’s police training addresses the tactical side of the use of force; specifically addressing how an officer protects his or herself from a threat. Further education is required to provide a social context on how an interaction between an officer and individual will later impact the community, as well as police-community relations.

The suggested new education would go beyond the traditional applied skills and incorporate critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills. Agencies that implement Community-Oriented Policing (COP) will find this problem-based learning highly beneficial to assist both their recruits and current officers. Educational institutions

can provide assistance by forming partnerships with policing agencies in order to bring adult and problem-based learning to a police officer training program. Educational institutions can also assist through the COP method in providing law enforcement education to officers as a part of mandatory annual continued education.

3. Literature Review

Community Oriented Policing (COP) has been a method utilized for nearly thirty years. According to this approach, the community and law enforcement work cooperatively by focusing primarily on the development of solid relationships between the community and their jurisdiction's law enforcement agencies (Wehrman & DeAngelis, 2011). COP has significantly developed over the past thirty years with more and more jurisdictions having adopted this method. Several successful programs have spawned from the COP method including citizen's patrols, neighborhood watches and other such programs (Taylor, 2002; Xu, Fiedler, & Flaming, 2005). Social cohesion and collective efficacy are the goals of COP. The community takes responsibility for protecting one another as neighbors watch out for neighbors (Morabito, 2010). In fact, over 90 percent of police agencies that serve populations of 25,000 or more have adopted the COP method (Morabito, 2010).

In an effort to create bonds within the community, concentration has been given to the development of relationships with diverse members of the community and their law enforcement agents. Law enforcement officers are assigned long-term to particular areas of the community so that they develop connections and relationships through consistent interactions (Chappell, 2009). Police visibility is increased through less formal interactions such as officers engaging in informal conversation with homeowners or storekeepers. These informal interactions help in changing negative views of police (Chappell, 2009). One on one relationship building has provided opportunities for more personalized relationships and, therefore, cultural differences lessen (Connell, Miggans, & McGloin, 2008).

Even when officers are off duty several agencies encourage strong communication with the jurisdictions to which they are assigned (Connell et al., 2008). Diamond and Weiss (2009) contend that this geographic accountability affects the crime rate and assists in reducing community conflict. Researchers contend that the open communication between the members of the community and law enforcement agents leads to positively affecting the safety of the community (Connell, Miggans, & McGloin, 2008). This effort to build trust with minority members of the community has been somewhat successful (Wehrman & DeAngelis, 2011). However, our communities are rapidly changing with communities becoming more and more diverse.

Researchers opine that the more citizens are willing to share with law enforcement, the safer the community will become (Wells, Schafer, Varano, & Bynum, 2006). The research shows that agencies that invest time in diversity education and that become familiar with cultural differences are more apt to resolve conflicts and prevent crime (Payne & Button, 2009). The educational community can provide training opportunities in critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills in order for officers to have the needed decision making skills set and de-escalation techniques (Safi & Burell, 2007).

The role of law enforcement has moved from merely enforcing the law to becoming a problem solver within the community. However, the education provided at academies has not reflected this evolution. Nearly all police academies educate through the behaviorist style of learning wherein information is provided by lecture and the student transfers that information to the field (Birzer & Tannehill, 2001). Ninety percent of academy learning is task oriented (Hundersmarck, 2005). Learning based on lecture is outdated and does not allow students to become better problem solvers through critical thinking. Training geared towards problem solving, critical thinking and communication skills will enhance the contemporary law enforcement officer's professional abilities to more effectively serve their community (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak, 2015).

4. Discussion

4.1 Educational Partnerships

With the growing multi-cultural nature of our communities and the increased need for cross-cultural leadership, enhancement of COP is now required (Hudson, 2014). Educational institutions can assist in this process. Through creating community connections, COP has aimed to lessen cultural gaps. However, education geared to teach law enforcement cross-cultural competence is necessary prior to these officers first entry into their communities. Such education may have been of assistance in the recent civil disturbances in Baltimore, Ferguson, New York City, South Carolina and North Charleston.

Morabito (2010) posits that forming partnerships between the police and educational institutions helps to build community trust. Education in cultural diversity is important for an officer to be fully effective within the community. This education should begin early in the officer's career and be repeated through annual training and

education (Williams, 2012). Law enforcement officers should be educated regarding understanding the various cultures within their community so that officers are better prepared to engage with these members and to respond to them in a manner that is situationally appropriate (Vodde, 2009).

Studies reveal that higher education is not required for most law enforcement agents. In fact, recent studies reveal that less than 1% of police departments and sheriff's offices have a four-year degree requirement (Hickman & Reaves, 2006). The paramilitary approach to training officers is still utilized in the police academy (Vodde, 2009). The academy is often the primary way in which officers gain entry into the profession. In most of law enforcement academies traditional education is provided. More contemporary education is now needed due to the role of officers changing from enforcer of law to problem solver within the community. When law enforcement agencies partner with educational institutions to provide continued annual education, both the agency and the community that they serve will benefit (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak, 2015).

4.2 Academy Education

Traditional education in the academy does not focus on problem solving and is presented in pedagogical style of teaching and learning. This type of education promotes the teacher to take on full responsibility for the content that is learned and thereafter, to conduct an evaluation of the instruction with the students (Knowles, 1990; Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005; Whitby, 2013). Conversely, in the andragogy style of teaching, it is the student who is responsible for his or her own learning and, thereafter, self-evaluation is encouraged (1990; 2005).

Knowles opined that adult education should be less focused on studying the materials and more focused on problem solving skills (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). Knowles theory of andragogy teaches adults to be self-directed. Instead of focusing on the "how", which is the traditional paramilitary approach of law enforcement, the theory of andragogy focuses on the "why" (Vodde, 2009).

The labeling of andragogy and pedagogy has been debated in education for decades. However, two of Knowles (1990) assumptions may arguably benefit the law enforcement officer's educational experience (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005; Whitby, 2013). First, Knowles' contends that the adult learner has a different experience in learning. Second he surmises that the adult learner has a different orientation to learning. When combining these two assumptions it can be argued that adults develop a foundation of learning that they seek to use for problem solving purposes that relate to their profession (1990; 2005; 2013). Problem solving is a fundamental tool in a law enforcement officer's profession.

Many contemporary leaders in law enforcement have proposed changing academy education to the constructivist approach (Hundersmark, 2009). This educational model is very similar to andragogy and is considered a more appropriate type of education considering law enforcement's evolving role as problem solver within the community. According to this approach, the student learns primarily through peer collaboration and problem based instruction. Learning is focused on the dynamic culture of the classroom so that students become accustomed to collaboration regardless of their cultural differences. This role play and collective problem solving better prepares the law enforcement student as a cross cultural leader upon their graduation from the academy. This type of education should continue annually throughout an officer's career.

A new model of education that was created as an alternative to current field placement officer training is the Police Officer Training (PTO) program. This program incorporates contemporary adult education such as critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills into law enforcement education (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak, 2015). The PTO program was initiated in conjunction with Community Oriented Policing in an effort to lessen the paramilitary style of police education and to focus officers on becoming problem solvers within their communities. It addresses the traditional role of the police. Yet focuses on that role specifically in the context of the community in which they serve. A new officer is not privy to this education.

The PTO program is available to officers after training at the academy. Only six agencies throughout the United States have adopted this new method of education as mandatory for their law enforcement officers after completing training at the academy (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak, 2015). Educational leaders in law enforcement have spawned the PTO program based on such theorists as Dewey (1933), Bloom (1956) and Knowles (1990; 2005) who were each proponents of problem solving and critical thinking in effective adult educational curriculum.

4.3 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking skills are demonstrated when gathering, analyzing and evaluating information in the process of decision-making. Michael Scriven and Richard Paul (2003) define critical thinking as "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or

evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (para. 1). When developing skills for professional application, critical thinking can provide opportunities in one’s ability to analyze and approach problems (Bensley, 2010). Problem solving is an important element in any profession.

Nosich (2012) clarifies that critical thinking encompasses pertinent aspects; such as being reflective, applying standards, exhibiting reasonableness and authenticity. Additional stages are provided; asking the correct questions; addressing the questions through reasoning; and believing the end results of the reasoning. Brookfield posits, “critical thinking is necessary for personal survival... it is a lived reality pressing in on us in the shifting contexts of the personal, occupational and political changes we experience” (pp. 20-21).

Other researchers theorize that critical thinking can improve outcomes not only for the individual critical thinker but, also, for others. Diane (2003) raises the point of critical thinking as direct thinking since the focus is of a desired outcome. With the usage of a cognitive skills set, critical thinking will often lead to a constructive outcome. Critical thinking is goal specific directed and provides a purposeful process by comprising of problem solving, formulating inferences, crafting meticulous decisions, and analyzing plausible outcomes. Researchers contend that education geared to problem solving through critical thinking allows officers to ask questions, hypothesize, evaluate and address a situation without applying assumptions and biases. The problem solving method of education is student centered and focuses on real life situations, allowing officers to learn with their community as enlisted members in the learning process (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak, 2015).

By contrast, the curriculum at academies is more substantively oriented than problem solving oriented. There are also no courses offered through the recruit program dedicated to critical thinking. The textbooks used in the academies reflect this gap. The Florida Basic Recruit Training Program textbook currently lacks chapters dedicated to critical thinking. Additionally, there are no courses offered through the Florida Basic Recruit Training dedicated to the development of interpersonal communication skills with members of the community (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2014). With the current societal changes in populations, interpersonal communication skills are becoming more and more imperative (McDermott & Hulse, 2012).

4.4 Interpersonal Communication Training

Interpersonal communication is considered a “soft” skill and is commonly overlooked in traditional police training (Fraser, 2011). The nature of police work often translates that law enforcement efforts result in lower crime rates but also an increase in complaints (McDermott & Hulse, 2012). Interpersonal communication skills are essential to reducing lawsuits stemming from harsh police work (2012). “Encouraging police to use interpersonal skills in their work has brought big returns” stated Michael, the director of loss control for Tennessee Municipal League Risk Management Pool (Ceniceros, 2003, para. 11).

Law enforcements’ interactions with the community illustrate the need for interpersonal skills training in academies and professional development opportunities. Training police officers to have strong interpersonal communication skills can assist in managing their own emotions as well as handling those encounters with the general public exhibiting anger and hostility. Effective communication skills will enable law enforcement to develop a solid rapport with the community. Police academies need an effective structure for teaching essential interpersonal skills (McDermott & Hulse, 2012).

Diamond and Weiss (2009) contend that both critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills geared towards de-escalation, decision-making and discretion should begin in the academy and extend throughout an officer’s career, until the officer retires. Since the academy is paramilitary in approach and because of the lack of requirement of higher education for these officers, adult problem solving skills are not traditionally emphasized (Vodde, 2009; Safi & Burell, 2007). Annual training is currently provided to law enforcement by educational institutions in such areas as: constitutional Law, courtroom procedure, criminal procedure, criminal law and civil liability. These subjects are content based. However, limited training in cross-cultural competence and interpersonal skills are emphasized.

4.5 Building Competencies through Education

Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) have been developed in some agencies across the United States. Many of these CITs train their members in cross cultural competence and diversity. The CIT curriculum educates officers in effective communication skills and active listening. This educational approach incorporates role-play that allows the officer to utilize critical thinking skills. This type of de-escalation training can reduce police liability, while also reducing injury to community members and injury to officers (Oliva, Morgan, & Compton, 2010).

However, numerous law enforcement agencies across the Country still do not have CITs. Therefore, not only are the officers who are on the front lines not trained in these skills, these departments also lack a specific team dedicated to this competency. Since the professional and the person in crisis typically come from different cultures (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, religion etc.) the immediacy of building a bond of trust between these two individuals is imperative (Dykeman, 2005).

Advancing law enforcement officers' problem solving skills and interpersonal skills can lead in solving cultural misunderstandings and misperceptions (Kappler & Gaines, 2005). Since police officers are required to make quick and critical decisions, higher-level learning is needed to assess each circumstance (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000). The ability to effectively develop trust and rapport requires the professional to communicate both verbally and non-verbally in a knowledgeable and empathetic manner. Research has shown that education in communicating and relating to people from various backgrounds has enhanced law enforcement performance (Breci, 1994; Smith & Aamodt, 1997). Research has also shown that education focused on problem solving is more effective than education that is not problem solving oriented (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006).

A large aspect of building trust for the criminal justice professional is dependent on relating to people and being culturally competent (Hudson, 2014). Cultural competence has been defined as a set of congruent attitudes and policies that are incorporated as policy amongst professionals that enables those professionals to work effectively in the face of both simple and complex cross cultural situations (King, 2009). Understanding various cultures and learning how members of a particular group perceive, behave and make judgments about their world is critical to reducing crisis (Dykeman, 2005).

5. Conclusion

Multiculturalism in the United States is rapidly leading to significant societal changes demanding that law enforcement officers assume the role of problem solvers within their communities. Accordingly, the educational curriculum for law enforcement officers needs to reflect these contemporary demands. To promote community and officer safety, officers should now be required to receive academy education focusing on critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills. Education focusing on problem solving should be required on an annual basis and be mandated for all continuing law enforcement certification purposes. This new curriculum can be developed, offered and promoted in partnership with educational institutions through the already existing Community Oriented Policing method.

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