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FAMILY INTERVENTION POLICE TEAMS AS A COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE

MORTON BARD

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The idea of utilizing police as a mental health resource would, at first blush, appear to be the most unlikely prospect imaginable. Yet, careful evaluation of the realities of modern social existence suggests that law enforcement and mental health are not such strange bedfellows after all. Indeed, such evaluation also reveals the unbridled stereotypical thinking that each group harbors about the other.

Ask the average psychologist to speculate about the type of person who chooses to become a policeman and chances are good that you will get a quick and glib response that policemen are people who are either latently or actually sadistic, paranoid, or criminal. On the other hand, policemen are just as likely to disparagingly characterize mental health professionals as eggheads, do-gooders, or "nuts." These stereotypes, which have been allowed to go unchecked, have been exceedingly costly to both groups and most costly of all to society at large.

It is suggested here that, as understandable as they are in origin, we can no longer afford the luxury of these stereotypes. There is little question that the basic professional commitments of both groups place them in clearly antithetical positions. The police represent the *status quo*—the guardians of society's prevailing value system . . . suspicious of and hostile to change. The very act of enforcing the law has implicit in it opposition to change. The mental health professional, however, predicates his activity on the desirability of change; on encouraging open communication and the free exchange of feeling and thought. Small wonder, then, that the polarized positions of both groups would seem to preclude any possibility of a meaningful rapprochement.

But the rapid changes in society have called forth a reexamination of traditionally held beliefs, often offering startling possibilities which only a short time ago would have been regarded as inconceivable. The utilization of the policeman as a mental health resource *within the context of his law enforcement function* is one such possibility.

Actually, it is undoubtedly true that for many policemen, as for many mental health workers, the basic and underlying occupational motivation is the desire to help others. Yet, while this desire is an acceptable and, indeed, desirable quality to be attributed to beginners in any of the helping professions, it is not identified as a motivating attribute in policemen. However, it is no doubt an important motivation for a significant number of beginning policemen, but one that is quickly "turned off" by the law enforcement establishment. After all, the police mystique, born of the legendary sheriff of frontier days, places its highest value on a masculinity usually defined by toughness, imperviousness to feelings, and a tight-lipped readiness to neutralize conflict by a quick draw in the middle of Main Street.

What happens to those policemen whose basic motivation is to help, to be the embodiment of the strong yet benign and giving father? Chances are they quickly get the message—they learn during the earliest months of service that the system does not reward "helpers," that those who "make it" do so by suppressing compassion and by adopting the masculine posture consistent with the establishment's expectations. Regrettably, this early learning is reinforced by a steady diet of real experiences with the most disordered and unpredictable elements in society. Confused and embittered, such

policemen, if unable to work out compromise solutions (such as Youth Squad, Rescue Service, etc.), often become the most cynical transmitters of the traditional police mystique.

In these days of increasing social tension, increasing crimes (particularly of violence), increasing mental health manpower shortages, and increasing need for a university-community dialogue, novel approaches to these problems are necessary along lines usually precluded by stereotypical thinking. Committed to the practicum education of doctoral students in clinical and social psychology and also committed to extending psychology's impact through existing community institutions, The Psychological Center of The City College in New York developed one such innovative approach. Located in West Harlem, the Center identified a local police precinct as one community institution having particular significance in these days of social unrest and developed a program to provide: 1) a crime prevention technique which could be coupled with improving police-community relations; 2) an immediately responsive mental health service; 3) a community consultative educational experience for graduate students; and 4) research opportunities of atypical dimensions in the community.

Limitations of time permit only a brief description of the program.¹ In essence, eighteen patrolmen (nine white and nine black) were selected from among 45 volunteers of a command of about 650 men. The men selected were aware that their participation offered no reward other than three college credits and an opportunity to become particularly adept in the management of family disturbances. They were selected on the basis of brief interviews to determine their motivation, interest, and stability for the kind of duty we were projecting. They were informed that they would be working in uniform around the clock and performing *all* police functions, but that in addition, whenever a known family disturbance occurred in their precinct area (population 85,000), their radio car would be dispatched, regardless of the sector of its occurrence. Six men of the unit were assigned each tour of duty, of whom two were expected to be available to man the Family Crisis Car. In each case, the regularly assigned pairs would be biracial in composition.

¹ BARD, M. AND BERKOWITZ, B. Training Police as Specialists in Family Crisis Intervention: A Community Psychology Action Program, 3 COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH JOURNAL, 315-317 (1967).

The program has been given full support as an experiment by the New York City Police Department and is supported financially by the Office of Law Enforcement Assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice. The initial month was set aside for intensive training. It involved full-time attendance of the 18 men for four weeks at lectures, seminars, group discussions, film sessions, workshops, and "learning-by-doing" through practical interventions in specially written and professionally performed family dispute situations. Designated by the Police Department as the Family Crisis Intervention Unit, the men have been functioning now for a little more than one year, during which time they engaged in 945 interventions with 665 families.

Since the conclusion of intensive training, the men appear on campus each week in regularly assigned groups of six for individual consultation (with senior graduate students) and for group discussions led by professional group leaders. There was no expectation that the intensive training above would suffice; we correctly assumed that constant in-service training would be necessary.

An extremely important element in the project was the demonstration to police authorities of the convergence of their professional interests and ours. In a culture replete with the theme "what's in it for me," we were able to show that sound psychological procedures would not contravene effective police performance. Indeed, we were able to demonstrate that quite the contrary was suggested by available evidence. For example, we pointed out that, while approximately one-third of homicides and even more assaults took place in the family, even more startling was the fact that 22% of the police killed nationally and about 40% of those injured met their difficulty while they were intervening in a family disturbance situation. We pointed out that these figures strongly suggested that the police may be behaving in ways to potentiate violence—often to the police themselves.

It is important to note that we did not suggest training police to be social workers or psychologists. Quite the contrary. We suggested that perhaps policemen could be enhanced in doing what they were already doing, while yet retaining their basic identities as working policemen. One of the criteria in evaluating the effectiveness of the program, therefore, was simply to determine if our men sustained injury in the course of their family intervention duties—particularly since they would

be more involved in this high hazard work than most other patrolmen. After the first year of operation, we are delighted that not one of our men has sustained an injury. In a neighboring precinct, with fewer cases and with the work distributed among 250 men rather than 18, in that same period of time there have been five reported instances of injury to police sustained in responding to a family conflict.

The community has demonstrated unusual regard for the unit. The grapevine has quickly spread the word that a family dispute brings men who are able and willing to spend time and effort in rendering assistance in cases of family disruption. The men make every effort to resolve the conflict when the crisis is at its height, but failing that they are trained to make referrals to agencies based upon their screening evaluation. This kind of early case-finding is primary prevention at its best. But the men—all experienced policemen—have been amazed by the response of the community. Where previously the police were refused admittance on arrival, the men of the FCIU find doors are now opened. Families refer one another and have come to the station house seeking to talk to a given patrolman, either for further help or to report an outcome. The men report that the most common expression is "I never had a cop talk to me like this." This leads us to the tentative conclusion that community attitudes cannot be changed by the usual educational or propaganda techniques; attitudes toward police will change when the police are seen as performing in ways consistent with principles of human psychology and when they are given realistic training to render professional police services with dignity.

One of the things we may have accomplished in this project is to sanction compassion—making it possible for policemen to be compassionate without experiencing ego-threat. (Characteristically, policemen seem able to express warm feelings with impunity only when the recipient is a young child or an elderly lady.) Other patrolmen observing the behavior of the FCIU members have been surprised to see the effectiveness of gentle or compassionate behavior. For example, not too long ago a distraught woman walked into the station house holding a bloody knife. She was incoherent and unable to tell the desk officer where she had been or what had happened. In desperation, he summoned the detectives, who were similarly unable to elicit any information. The precinct commander

ordered the FCIU car to the station house. One of the FCIU patrolmen, on learning the circumstances, approached the lady, and, taking her around the shoulder, walked her away from the group of policemen surrounding her and said, "Sweetheart, why don't you tell me all about it?" In less time than it takes to tell, the incoherent woman revealed that she had stabbed her husband and that he was bleeding in their nearby apartment. Prompt action at that point saved her husband's life.

This illustration evidences the freedom the FCIU patrolmen have developed in demonstrating compassionate behavior. The importance of the modeling effects of such behavior on the other members of the command cannot be minimized. Initially, other patrolmen were rather disparaging of the unit, subjecting its members to considerable kidding. But recently other patrolmen, particularly the younger ones, have grown respectful and interested in learning the techniques of marital conflict resolution. Indeed, there are a number of instances where the men in the family car have been utilized as consultants within their own command and even by the officers in other precincts.

The possibilities for collaboration between the psychological community and the police are limitless. There are many mental health services which can best be rendered by individuals already in the psychological front lines—and nobody is so much so as the police. After all, the police are available for anything 24 hours a day. It is a resource agency without parallel. And just think of the paradox in our urban ghettos: nobody is more hated, feared, and envied than the policeman; yet the police are the first to be summoned by ghetto residents in times of sickness, injury, and trouble. The paradox has a bizarre quality which is in itself necessarily productive of the highest levels of tension.

Varying estimates have the police involved in interpersonal services up to 90% of their working time. Yet 99% or more of training and of professional rewards are related to that small proportion of their time that is devoted to crime and law enforcement. An unbelievable range of interpersonal services can be effectively and expeditiously handled by the police with appropriate support by mental health professionals.

In the brief space allotted for these remarks, the writer has described a program in which an academic institution is collaborating in an action program with a local police organization in an

urban area. The model of training police as specialists in family crisis intervention while maintaining their basic identities as working policemen holds promise of wider applications than in family disturbances alone. In addition to the obvious advantages of bringing realistic police services to the community, it demonstrates that the applications of sound psychological principles may increase the policeman's effectiveness and his own personal safety as well. We do not believe that every patrolman could be a human behavioral specialist, but in this program we may have developed a sound demonstrative mechanism for the reorganization of police services in keeping with the complex realities of today's world. Finally, this approach may have profound effects upon the

community's view of the police. It is our conviction that "love-your-neighbor" (or policeman) advertising campaigns or time-limited discussions directed at changing deeply rooted attitudes often based on actual experience are naive, to say the least. Attitudes affecting the mutual perception of the police and their communities will change only when the police are realistically prepared for the work they do in a world much different from that of a hundred years ago—a time which still serves to shape police organizational structure. To that end, the psychological professions can contribute much, but only if they first succeed in expunging their own natural prejudices toward an essential reality in any human society—the police.