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SMALL GROUP DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSION: AN APPROACH TO POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

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The authors are all staff psychologists at the VA Hospital, Houston, Texas, and hold clinical faculty appointments in the Department of Psychiatry, Baylor College of Medicine. Drs. Bell, Hanson, and O'Connell served as group leaders for the Police-Community Program and Dr. Cleveland has evaluated the effectiveness of the program. The paper which is a condensation of a series of papers presented by the four authors at the San Francisco Symposium of the American Psychological Association describes a program of the Houston Police Department involving small group discussions between police officers and community members, especially minority group representatives.—EDITOR

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

There seems to be general agreement that the most pressing domestic problem confronting the country is that of rising urban tension. To a large degree urban tension, "The Urban Crisis," means increased friction between the city police force and segments of the black community. Resentments and frustrations nursed for years by the previously complacent black community find a target in the urban police force. Since, for many members of minority groups, the police represent the status quo and all that is feared and hated in white society, it is the police officer who becomes the object of hostility whether deserved or not by his actual behavior. The President's Riot Commission report by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders found that "almost invariably the incident that ignites disorder arises from police action."¹ Usually, the police action giving rise to the outbreak of violence is in itself routine and innocuous, but for the black community it may symbolize a long history of injustice and legitimate grievances.

Until May 1967, Houston, Texas, the nation's sixth largest city, had enjoyed relative calm as far as any widespread racial disturbance was concerned. Although numerous incidents involving blacks and the police pointed to rising tensions, no overt violence had erupted. But on May 16-17, 1967, four hours of gunfire occurred between the police and students at Texas Southern University, a predominantly Negro institution in Houston.

One officer was killed by a bullet of undetermined origin. Student rooms and belongings were ransacked by the police, ostensibly in search of hidden weapons.

This incident alerted the city administration to the fact that a racial crisis was at hand. Many feared another Watts or Detroit. A study by Justice², a psychologist, and an assistant to the mayor for race relations, found that Negro antagonism toward the police had increased significantly over the pre-TSU riot period. A team of interviewers had studied attitudes of 1798 Negroes from 22 different neighborhoods, concerning jobs, wages, the police, etc., prior to the TSU outbreak. Following the TSU incident the study was repeated in the same neighborhoods to assess attitudinal change. Results of these surveys indicated a significant rise in hostile feelings toward the police following the outbreak of violence.

The results of these surveys were influential in persuading the city administration that some type of educational or advisory program was needed to reduce existing tensions within the city. Originally the city advisors had in mind a lecture series on community relations to be presented to the police.

However a lecture series seemed inappropriate and ineffective since it provided no opportunity for badly needed exchange between the police and community. Instead, a small group interaction program involving police and community members seemed more promising, since such a program would provide full opportunity for exchange of

¹ U. S. Riot Commission, REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS, (Kerner Commission), NY, Bantam Books, 1968.

² JUSTICE, B. DETECTION OF POTENTIAL COMMUNITY VIOLENCE. Dissemination document-Grant 207 (5.044) Office of Law Enforcement Assistance, U. S. Department of Justice, Washington, D. C., 1968.

attitudes between officers and the participating community. Dr. Melvin P. Sikes³, then a clinical psychologist on the staff at the Houston VA Hospital, was asked to organize such a program.

Human Relations Training for Police and Community. The model employed to serve as a structural and procedural guideline in devising the police-community program was that provided by the Houston VA Hospital Human Relations Training Laboratory⁴. This Laboratory also supplied the police-community program with a majority of the professional group leaders with experience in human relations training.

The Houston VA Human Relations Training Laboratory applies the concepts and techniques of "T" group theory and sensitivity training to the problems of psychiatric patients. Departing from the traditional psychiatric treatment emphasis on the medical model, the Laboratory stresses a learning approach in the acquisition of new techniques to solve problems in living. Human relations training techniques have also been applied to the successful resolution of conflict between union and management groups, in community interracial strife, and in industry to cope with departmental friction. Accordingly, it was felt that the human relations approach would be suitable for dealing with police-community relationships.

Program Design and Format. A series of human relations training laboratories were devised, each lasting six weeks with about 200 police officers and an equal number of community members attending. The officers and citizens meet for three hours once a week over the six-week period. Approximately 40 officers and community members are scheduled for a three-hour session each of the five work days. These officers and citizens are further divided into three smaller groups meeting concurrently. The program will continue until the entire police force of approximately 1400 men has been involved.

Meetings are held in the neighborhood community centers and at the Police Academy⁵. An effort is made to recruit a cross-section of the community

but especially representatives of minority and poverty groups and dissidents⁶. Most of the officers attend in uniform but outside their regular tour of duty and receive extra salary from the city for their 18 hours of participation. Police are required to attend, but community participation is, of course, voluntary. Doctoral level psychologists with experience in human relations training and group therapy serve as group leaders. Financial support is entirely from private and local sources. Fees for the psychologists' professional services and funds for incidental expenses supporting the program are met through voluntary contributions from Houston business and industry. The cost for one six-week session is approximately \$20,000 with half this amount going to police salaries.

The major goals of the program are to promote a cooperative relationship between the community and police and to effect greater mutual respect and harmony. In order to achieve these ends the group sessions are structured so as to have the police and community first examine the damaging stereotypes they have of each other; second, to consider the extent to which these stereotypes affect their attitudes, perceptions and behaviors toward each other; third, to look at the ways in which each group reinforces these stereotypes in the eyes of the other; and fourth, to develop a cooperative, problem-solving attitude directed toward resolving differences and reducing conflict to a level where both groups can work together constructively.

In the initial session police and community first meet separately to develop images of their own group and the other group. This strategy was taken from an exercise used successfully by Blake, Mouton, and Sloma⁷ in resolving conflict in a union-management situation. Police are asked to develop a list of statements as to how they see themselves and a second list of their view of the community. Community members do likewise. The groups are then brought together and these images compared and discussed. Subsequent sessions are devoted to correction of distortions identified in these lists, diagnosis of specific areas of disagreement, identification of key issues and sources of friction and, finally, devising methods for conflict resolution.

⁶ The Reverend John P. Murray, Director, Houston Council on Human Relations, was untiring in his efforts to obtain community participation.

⁷ BLAKE, R. R., MOUTON, JANE S., AND SLOMA, R. L. The union-management intergroup laboratory: Strategy for resolving intergroup conflict. *THE JOURNAL OF APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE*, Vol. 1, #1, 1965.

³ Now with the U. S. Department of Justice, Houston, Texas. Dr. Sikes is administrative director of the Houston police-community program.

⁴ HANSON, P. G., ROTHAUS, P., JOHNSON, D. L., AND LYLE, F. A. Autonomous groups in human relations training for psychiatric patients. *JOURNAL OF APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE*, 1966, 2, 305-323.

⁵ Particular credit is due Inspector C. D. Taylor, Commanding Officer, Bureau of Personnel and Prevention, Houston Police Department, for his unceasing support of the program.

The resulting self and other images developed by the police and community groups are far too numerous to be listed. However, a summary of some of the more salient images serves to present the flavor of this aspect of the sessions:

Police Self-Image. As officers we are ethical, honest, physically clean and neat in appearance, dedicated to our job, with a strong sense of duty. Some officers are prejudiced, but they are in the minority, and officers are aware of their prejudice and lean over backwards to be fair. We are a close knit, suspicious group, distrustful of outsiders. We put on a professional front; hard, calloused, and indifferent, but underneath we have feelings. We treat others as nicely as they will let us. We are clannish, ostracized by the community, used as scapegoats, and under scrutiny even when off duty trying to enjoy ourselves. We are the blue minority.

Police Image of Community. Basically the public is cooperative and law-abiding, but uninformed about the duties, procedures, and responsibility of the police officer. The upper class, the rich, support the police, but feel immune to the law and use their money and influence to avoid police action against themselves and their children. The middle class support the police and are more civic-minded than upper or lower classes. The major share of police contact with the middle class is through traffic violations. The lower class has the most frequent contact with the police and usually are uncooperative as witnesses or in reporting crime. They have a different sense of values, live only for today and do not plan for tomorrow. As police officers we see the Houston Negro in two groups, (1) Negro—industrious, productive, moral, law-abiding, and not prone to violence; (2) “nigger”—lazy, immoral, dishonest, unreliable, and prone to violence.

Community Self-Image. We lack knowledge about proper police procedures and do not know our rights, obligations, and duties in regard to the law. There is a lack of communication among social, geographical, racial, and economic segments of the community. We do not involve ourselves in civic affairs as we should, and we have a guilty conscience about the little crimes (traffic violations) we get away with, but are resentful when caught. We relate to the police as authority figures, and we feel uncomfortable around them. The black community feels itself second class in relation to the police. The majority of the com-

munity is law-abiding, hard working, pays taxes, is honest and reliable.

Community Image of Police. Some police abuse their authority, act as judge, jury, and prosecutor, and assume a person is guilty until proven innocent. They are too often psychologically and physically abusive, name-calling, handle people rough, and discriminate against blacks in applying the law. Police are cold and mechanical in performance of their duties. We expect them to be perfect, to make no mistakes and to set the standard for behavior. The police see the world only through their squad car windshield and are walled off from the community. Our initial reaction when we see an officer is “blue.”

PROGRAM EVALUATION

In an attempt to determine to what extent this community action program was achieving its stated goal of increased mutual respect and harmony between police and citizens, a number of procedures were followed.

Police and community participants were asked to complete a questionnaire at the close of their final session, inquiring about their reaction to the program. Results from about 800 police and 600 citizens completing the program indicate enthusiastic acceptance by the participating community and grudging to moderately good acceptance by the police. For example, 93 percent of the community rate the program either Good, Very Good, or Excellent, only seven percent rating it Poor. For the police, 85 percent rate it between Good and Excellent with 15 percent rating it Poor. However, where 18 percent of the community rate it Excellent, only four percent of the police do so. Moreover, 65 percent of the community say that as a result of the program their feelings about the police are more positive, 31 percent unchanged, and 4 percent more negative. For the police, 37 percent reflect a more positive community attitude, 61 percent report no change, and 2 percent more negative.

For the community the most frequently expressed reaction to the program is increased recognition and appreciation of the police officer as an individual and a human being rather than a member of an undifferentiated group, “the blue minority.” Citizens most often comment on their tendency to dehumanize the police and see them as unfeeling, authoritarian robots, rather than real

people who sometimes make honest mistakes, get angry, or behave unwisely.

For their part the police most often record a sense of gratification that as a result of the program the community gains some appreciation of the policeman's role, what he can do and cannot do. The police seem surprised as to how misinformed the public is regarding police procedures and limits of authority.

Later evaluation of the program included administration of a questionnaire especially designed to assess attitudes about the poor, minority groups and the community at large⁸. As might be expected, the police and black community differ widely on social issues involving poverty and minority groups as measured by this questionnaire, with the police scoring at the high prejudice end of the scale. However, participation in this program serves to attenuate to a significant degree the extreme attitudes held by the police. There is one exception to this latter statement in that one police group *increased* their prejudice scores following participation in the program. However, these officers were tested the week following the fracas between Chicago police and demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention when feelings were running high among the police about the issue of "law and order."

Problems Inherent in a Community Action Program. This police-community program did not proceed evenly or without problems. Consistent community participation has been a major problem. Although recruitment of the community was effected through announcements by the news media, social clubs, churches, and even door-to-door solicitation, citizen cooperation often failed to materialize. Inconsistent community participation disrupted the continuity of group discussions. Many citizens turned out for the initial session, largely to express grievances and blow-off steam. Having accomplished this, they often did not return for subsequent sessions.

Extremist groups from the community attended, often for other than constructive purposes. For example, an organized group of black militants descended on one meeting and engaged the police in a heated recitation of complaints and verbal

abuse. However, when the group leader finally called a halt to the harassment and suggested the group now consider possible constructive solutions to these complaints, the militants abruptly departed. These hit-and-run tactics employed by some community participants were especially difficult to control.

Extreme right-wing white political group members came apparently only to maintain the status quo, "Support their local police" and take copious notes for the purpose of publishing slanted and captious articles about the program. For example, a local newspaper with strong right-wing political bias published an article describing the "brain washing" techniques, self-criticism and confessional approaches used by the "Communist Revolution" and left the reader with the impression that this police-community program was similar in goals and procedure.

Some of the police were not sympathetic either to the goals or substance of the program and attempted to sabotage the program where possible, by refusing to participate in the group discussions or by adopting a hostile and belligerent stance. Both the police and community tended to be suspicious of the program and its "real" intent and purpose.

Retention of effective group leaders for the program proved difficult. Leaders for a program such as this need personal attributes that would tax the resources of an Eagle Scout, including having poise and maturity, being experienced and skillful in handling difficult groups, intuitive, inventive, and resourceful. A third of the group leaders were, themselves, minority group members, and these leaders appeared to enjoy a decided advantage in working with both the police and community. But attrition among group leaders was high. Many reasons were given for resigning from the program, chief among them being the emotionally exhausting strain of the sessions and lack of visible reward from either police or community in the form of recognition as to the positive contribution made by the program. The repetitious and monotonous character of the sessions was another frequently mentioned detraction. Each six-week session carried a deadly encore of issues already dealt with in preceding laboratories. It was difficult for group leaders to build up interest in still another round of self-righteous accusations by the community and massive denials by the police. Some group leaders withdrew because they could

⁸ This questionnaire is called the Community Attitude Survey (CAS). It contains 38 items requiring response to each statement on a six point continuum from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale yields a General Prejudice score and four sub-scores touching on special aspects of community relations.

not take the hostility expressed within their group, hostility they assumed to be directed at them personally. These leaders failed to recognize that the hostility, whether expressed by police or community, was not a personal attack on them, but rather for what the leader represented as an agent of change. Experienced leaders were able to interpret this phenomenon to the group and focus their attention on their own resistance to change.

SUMMARY

Has the exposure of 1400 police officers and a corresponding number of community members been worth the time, money, and effort expended? One can point to the fact that there has been no further rioting and neither the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., or Robert F. Kennedy was followed by racial incidents. Houston police characterize 1968 as a "cool" summer in contrast to 1967. Another encouraging sign is that the

Mayor's office reports a 70 percent drop in citizen complaints about police behavior for the seven-month period following inception of the program⁹. Also, there are other suggestions of improvements in police-community relations: a white police officer organizes his own group of blacks and whites for continuing discussions in his home; officers stop their squad cars to talk with black people in their neighborhood for no other reason than to meet them.

Despite setbacks in the program and the sometimes contrary results of individual laboratories, the consensus of the participating staff, the city administrators, and the business patrons providing financial support has been cautiously affirmative in proclaiming the program a success. No claim is made that 18 hours of discussion will sweep away years of rancor and distrust. But it is a necessary beginning.

⁹ Op cit. 2.