Shining a light on worrisome police interactions with people of color: How school counselors can walk at the forefront for change.

By: Johnson, J. C., & Zeligman, M. R.

My observations as a person of color in America

A bias is defined as “an inclination to present or hold a partial perspective at the expense of (possibly equally valid) alternatives.” (Merriam Webster, 2016) With the aforementioned definition in mind, I am not sure whether my perspective constitutes a “bias” per say because I do not hold the notion that all police officers are bad. However, I do believe there are things innately wrong with the police institution that have both jaded me and caused me to mistrust police officers in general.

Truthfully, my distrust of law enforcement has partially been shaped by the recent events portrayed on social media/television regarding the long list of persons that have been killed by police officers. I did not write this article to argue whether the police officers were in the right. I do not believe that this would be the appropriate medium to discuss my feelings on these events in full. Let me begin by saying that I respect what it is that members of the police force attempt to do on a daily basis, by being prepared to lay their lives on the line to preserve law and order. Nonetheless, we have come to a time where one must assess exactly what peace is being upheld, and whom this warped definition of peace is actually benefitting.

What the police force needs to understand is that the fear and distrust that minorities (in particular black men and women) have towards police officers is not a new phenomenon. To help explain this point, I will share one of my initial observations regarding many of the African-American men and women I encountered upon my arrival in America as a young immigrant. I can recall my initial confusion upon realizing that many of my African-American brothers and
sisters were genuinely terrified of dogs. I couldn’t understand it coming from Jamaica where we have stray dogs that run along the streets and alleyways throughout the island, much like the pigeons one sees in the major cities of America that have grown so accustomed to living among humans that they approach you without trepidation. However, I have recently begun developing my own hypothesis regarding this apparent phobia.

For years, my African-American predecessors marched and rallied in a desperate plea for freedom and equality. On many occasions these men and women who they themselves, along with their predecessors helped to build America, had police dogs let loose on them by police officers. I have read stories from survivors of these attacks recounting their desperate struggle to free themselves from the vice grip of the dogs’ teeth as these ferocious beasts tore away at their flesh and lacerated bones. My belief is that events such as these have consequently caused a fear of dogs to be passed down from generation to generation, to the point where it has become somewhat of an innate phobia for many members of the African-American community.

In similar fashion, many members of the African-American community grow up hearing these same stories about the plights their ancestors had to face, and the police men and women who routinely beat them, hosed them down, and treated them like animals in their fight for equality. Compounding that with what is being shown in the news, and perhaps personal encounters they have had with members of the police force, it’s not hard for me to see where this rift between the black community and the police force stems from.

This rift is so well recognized, that recently a law was enacted by the Governor of Illinois, Bruce Rauner, requiring individuals participating in driver’s education courses in the state to learn how to effectively handle being stopped by police officers. This act has come under scrutiny because many view this as another example of the onus being placed on the citizens to
remain calm in a highly stressful situation rather than emphasizing improved conduct by the members of the police force. The question many are asking is, where is the accountability for the police officers? I am actually of the belief that this is a step in the right direction; however, this is a shortsighted solution if this is the extent of the planned intervention. For an intervention involving two parties to be effective, said intervention must be a two-pronged attack addressing the needs, and reasons for change of both parties. Therefore, until I hear about new regulations to the training regimen of police officers, I cannot fairly say whether this law passed in Illinois is simply a hasty decision, or a necessary step towards something grander.

On a similar note, after the Eric Garner incident, I can recall the men of my church holding a three hour meeting discussing “how to appropriately address policemen and women”. This discussion was held by an African-American male, a former cop, who proceeded to lambast the African-American community for their defiance and disrespect of policemen; and continued by stating that the victims of these tragedies brought this upon themselves. I remember instinctively jumping to my feet devoid of any emotion other than disgust and utter embarrassment, and telling him plainly how that is the crux of the problem. The media and many people place blame on the black community and view these problems as something that the black community solely has to address. This belief is both false, and extremely dangerous. I believe that it is on both parties (i.e., the black community and the police force) to address this rift, and to come together in order to make a change. Sadly, perhaps this is my inherent skeptic coming to the surface, but this sounds unfathomable and highly unlikely, and I fear we are doomed to repeat the same tragic cycle for years to come.
How School Counselors Can Respond

Nevertheless, there are approaches I believe we as professionals in the counseling field can take in order to bring much-needed attention to the issue of police brutality. As school counselors, we are taught to advocate. Regardless of gender, sexuality, or creed, as professionals in this field we have voices that carry substantial weight. All it takes is for us to use this position of privilege, and speak to those who are unaware of the impact these events are having not only on society, but on the psyches of young boys and girls of color.

As a current masters-level student at Georgia State University, one thing that I have been taught is the importance of active listening and empathizing. These skills are helpful in both connecting me with clients, and also allowing me to better understand their world view. For those who may not yet be able to see the damage being done by way of these police related incidents, I implore you to have conversations with individuals who think differently than you do. I ask this not because I am expecting your views will change and mirror those of my own. I ask this in order that you will have a better understanding about what other people experience and how others may feel. In addition, by using the skills of active listening and empathizing, the conversation will naturally delve deeper into their reasoning behind their feelings, their fears, and aspirations for change. Conversations such as these, aid in bridging gaps in understanding and allow discussions for change to take place.

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory posited that an individual’s development is influenced by several overlapping environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). I believe that this is a reciprocal process. Much like an individual is shaped by their environmental systems, the surrounding systems are shaped by the individual. Meaning, that a philosophical change in the beliefs of one individual has the potential to impact the family and
friends of the individual, and on a more grand scale, change the attitudes and ideologies of the individual’s culture.

We have all been gifted with unique talents that can impact our culture. Much attention is being given to the protestors who place themselves in a position of vulnerability in order to further a message, and rightfully so. However, not everyone has the inclination and/or lung capacity to protest. Use your gift to bring attention to the issue, whether that is by writing, speaking to an audience, or using your relational skills to help someone better understand a point.

**How People of Color Can Respond**

My advice to both young and older men and women of color is this; do not be afraid to voice your opinion as to why you feel vulnerable. Share how these feelings of vulnerability not only affects your relationship with police officers, but every relationship you have, and every thought and decision you choose to make. And specifically to Black-Americans, no longer should we have to be fearful that shining a light on an issue that affects us, and the generations to come, will brand us with the label of “the angry black man/woman”. People will always have their assumptions, and we are only hurting ourselves by keeping silent.

I do realize that voicing one’s opinion is a tiring process, and attempting to explain your views to those who may feign empathy but are only willing to listen if the solution does not affect their level of privilege can be a disheartening experience. Nonetheless, this is our fight. We may have allies of different races and creeds that are just as passionate about improving police interactions with people of color, however, the burden lies with men and women of color to share their thoughts and ideas. Only a person of color can convey the feeling of fear that is evoked by being pulled over or being intimidated by police officers.
Lastly, find an avenue through which you can contribute to not only furthering this discussion, but also to helping your fellow brothers and sisters of color who are struggling. Not everyone is a gifted orator, but there are several ways in which you can reach the hearts of many. Find opportunities to mentor or volunteer at a foundation such as “Big Brother Big Sister”, “the Boys and Girls Club” or your local church.

I can personally attest to the powerful influence mentorship can have on young Black-American boys and girls. For a year, I had the privilege of working as a Mentor for a Counseling agency that works with underprivileged youth of the Greater Atlanta area. During one of my final meetings with a former client, we discussed individuals in his life who could effectively take over my position of “role model” once our time had ended. In order to gain this information, I posed the question of “Who is the most successful person in your life?” to my client. I will never forget the look in my client’s eyes as he answered. His look conveyed both respect, while simultaneously exhibiting sadness, as he answered saying “You are.” The fact that in our short time together he had begun considering me as an integral member of his personal world was an exuberant experience. However, I was saddened at the fact that a twenty two year old novice counselor was the closest definition to success that this young man had ever known.

These mentorship experiences for many adolescents and teenagers of color are considerably important. These experiences may be the only opportunity they have to gain one-on-one interaction with a professional not affiliated with their school. Mentorship allows you to use your voice, your mind, and your heart, to benefit someone who may never have had anyone advocate on their behalf. Not only does being a mentor show young men and women that you care for their well-being, but by way of your time and dedication, your actions will show that you also believe in their considerable potential.
People of color could also benefit from prioritizing self-care when painful events, and their graphic images, flood the media. Those who personally experience racial discrimination, as well as those who repeatedly witness such events indirectly, run the risk of experiencing race-based traumatic stress. In turn, individuals may find themselves feeling irritable, anxious, depressed, or having an increased sensitivity to threat, or difficulty concentrating. Engaging in activism, or mentoring, as mentioned above, allows individuals opportunities to appropriately channel feelings of anger and gain control over their emotions. In order to begin healing from this trauma, people of color should also allow themselves permission to create a safe space for themselves, which may include surrounding themselves with supportive loved ones, or simply deactivating social media outlets. In addition, find people in your life who validate you, and remind you that racial events in the community do not detract from your personal self-worth.

With all that said, I vow to continue assessing the issue, and being attentive to current events; ever formulating ideas and gathering resources in order to educate others. Most importantly, I vow to unite the police department and people of color in whatever way I am able. To start, I promise to continue the conversation while serving as a role model, friend, listening ear, or source of support to those who need.
Reference
