

Identity Crisis? Negotiating Blackness in the British Police Service: a Regional Perspective

By Barbara Perry and Catherine John-Baptiste¹

Abstract

Our paper will address preliminary findings from a pilot study in which we will interview a sample of black police personnel from Nottingham, UK. Our goal in this project is to uncover the mechanisms by which police officers as well as other police staff negotiate their black identities in the context of their roles within law enforcement – an entity that clearly been historically characterized by systemic racism.

¹ Barbara Perry, University of Ontario Institute of Technology and Catherine John-Baptiste Nottingham Trent University

In April of 1993, a young black man by the name of Stephen Lawrence was murdered in London in what is generally agreed to have been a racially motivated assault. However, the subsequent investigation by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) failed to lead to any convictions of the suspects. The reaction of Lawrence's family and their supporters to the failed prosecution was immediate and confrontational. It seemed clear to them that the case had been mishandled, that the racial characteristics of the crime were left unattended. So vocal and persistent were the charges of racism that the Home Secretary commissioned an Inquiry to delve into the alleged mishandling of the case. At the heart of the subsequent MacPherson Inquiry was the relationship between police and black and minority ethnics (BME). The most damaging assessment to emerge from the inquiry was the indictment of the MPS, and other police agencies, as entities steeped in institutional racism:

Given the central nature of the issue we feel that it is important at once to state our conclusion that institutional racism, within the terms of its description set out in Paragraph 6.4 above, exists both in the Metropolitan Police Service and in other Police Services and other institutions countrywide (para. 6.39) . . . (U)pon the facts we assert that the conclusion that racism played its part in this case is fully justified. Mere incompetence cannot itself account for the whole catalogue of failures, mistakes, misjudgements (sic), and lack of direction and control which bedeviled the Stephen Lawrence investigation (para.6.45).

To highlight the notion of institutional racism moves the dialog out of the realm of atomistic and isolated acts of discrimination into the realm of systemic patterns of policy and practice that exclude or disadvantage members of BME communities. This is not to say that the former is not important; rather it puts it firmly in the context of broader, generally more insidious patterns of racism within the structure of the organization. As the Inquiry report defines it, institutional racism is characterized by

The collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (para. 6.34).

Note that MacPherson retains an emphasis on individual behaviours in this definition. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the subsequent analysis of racism within policing that he also took very seriously the racist practices that underlie the police culture.

While primarily directed toward relations between the police and BME communities, the report also had implications for the internal police culture, and about how race is negotiated within police units. As a later report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) (1997) declared, "Police officers (and other personnel) cannot be expected to behave in ways that will enhance relations with minority populations in the public at large if they fail to treat colleagues from the same group equitably" (para. 363). Indeed, since the first black

police officers were recruited in the late 1960s, racism – at both institutional and individual levels – has hampered the efforts of BME police staff.

This paper explores the contemporary experiences of black police staff in one Constabulary – Nottinghamshire. In our interviews, we sought to uncover the mechanisms by which police officers as well as other police staff negotiate their black identities in the context of their roles within law enforcement. Specifically, we discuss a number of emergent themes: The paper begins with an overview of extant literature in this area, followed by a brief summary of our project, and subsequently, by a discussion of the themes noted above.

Policing Race

That racism is endemic to the police culture is self-evident, as is the fact that this infects the ways in which members of BME groups are treated by police officers. The manifestations of this racism are many and varied, ranging from the use of derogatory language and epithets at one extreme, to brutal assaults on ethnic minority individuals at the other. Underlying the array of activities, of course, are racist and stereotypical mindsets that legitimate the hostility and discrimination directed toward particular groups. In addressed the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, the president of the Association of Chief Police Officers clearly acknowledged that the sort of institutional racism identified by the Report derived from

. . . the racism which is inherent in society which shapes our attitudes and behaviour. Those attitudes and behaviours are then reinforced and shaped by the culture of the organization that the person works for. In the police services there is a distinct tendency for officers to stereotype people. That creates problems in a number of areas, but particularly in the way officers deal with Black people (MacPherson, 1999: para.6.50).

Similarly, a review by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of the Constabulary (HMIC) (1997) of police and race relations makes the claim that there is "a direct and vital link between internal culture and the way people are treated and external performance." Such observations are supported by the scholarly evidence linking racist attitudes among police officers to their (mis)treatment of BME community members (Rowe, 2004; Bowling and Phillips, 2002; Holdaway, 1996).

Interestingly, BME community members are especially critical of the ways in which perceived police hostility toward them manifests in under-policing. Black (1980) reminds us that, while discrimination is generally taken to refer to the tendency toward harsher treatment of people of color viz. white people, this oversimplifies police behavior. In fact, Black argues, police are as likely to disregard the complaints of people of color. So for example, "Wealthier whites who offend blacks are expected to be treated leniently, while poor blacks who offend other poor blacks are expected to be handled with less severity than whites" (Black, 1980: 13). Here, the Canadian and Australian literature are especially informative. Cunneen (2001) and Neugebauer (1999) speak to the tendency of law enforcement officers to take less seriously the victimization of Aboriginal people – less seriously than their offending, and less seriously than the victimization of white people. Cunneen (2001) draws particular attention to "selective policing" as it affects

Aboriginal women who are victims of domestic violence. There is some evidence of such perceptions in the UK as well. The HMIC (1997) review of police-community race relations found that the people whom they consulted “inevitably saw racial bias in late attendance at scenes, indifferent service on arrival, and lack of cultural awareness” (para. 2.31). The message received is that they are not worth the time or energy devoted to other “worthier” constituents.

At the other end of the spectrum is the opposite tendency to over-police BME communities. This is especially evident in racial profiling and other related forms of “stop and search.” This, too, can be traced back in part to stereotyped views wherein “the crimes of the individual came to be seen as the crimes of the community” (Whitfield, 2004: 158). Whitfield’s observation reflects the apparent reality of law enforcement assumptions about the connection between race and criminality, assumptions that are ultimately used to justify selective intervention. The first faulty assumption is that it is members of BME communities that commit the majority of crimes, and thus warrant greater scrutiny. The second and related assumption is that most members of BME groups engage in criminal activity, and thus racial profiling is likely to result in a “hit,” i.e., the discovery of wrongdoing (Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, 2005).

Bowling and Phillips (2002) cite both official Home Office data and academic studies that underscore the broad disparities in the use of stop and search. One Home Office (2000) report found that blacks were stopped and searched five times more often than whites, while Asians were stopped relatively less, but still were still more likely to be stopped than whites. A cumulative report four years later shows that the trend is holding:

Black people and those of Mixed origin were more likely to be stopped than White people, whether on foot or in cars. Asian people were more likely to be stopped in vehicles than White people in vehicles, but no more likely to be stopped on foot. A detailed study of policing in London found not only that Black people were more likely than others to be stopped, but they faced a higher risk of multiple stops over the course of a year (Home Office, 2004: 14).

Disparate stop and search practices have significant consequences for police-community relations. They further alienate the affected communities, exacerbating historical trends. Ultimately, this has consequences for the ability of police to do their job, as it fosters unwillingness to cooperate.

Another reason for concern about the abuse of police stop and search authority has to do with the interaction itself. Research suggests that disproportionate stops and searches of members of BME groups contribute to their subsequent over-representation as arrestees, and as victims of police violence. The LCCR (nd) report noted earlier cites David Harris’ characterization of the self-fulfilling prophecy created by the practices associated with race based stops and searches:

Because police will look for drug crime among black drivers, they will find it disproportionately among black drivers. More blacks will be arrested, prosecuted, convicted, and jailed, thereby reinforcing the idea that blacks constitute the majority of drug offenders. This will provide a continuing motive and justification for stopping more black drivers as a rational way of using resources to catch the

most criminals.

Statistics in England and Wales bear out this trend, in that an arrest is more likely to be forthcoming for Blacks and Asians who are stopped and searched than is the case for their white counterparts (Rowe, 2004). Bowling and Phillips (2002) report that Blacks are typically four times as likely as whites to be arrested, and that Asians are also disproportionately affected. However, it is not necessarily the case that the arrests confirm the police officers' "suspicions." In fact, far too often the subsequent charge is unrelated to any predicate offence. Rather, it reflects the "fraught nature of the interface," that is, the arrest emerges out of the dynamics of the interaction between officer and "offender," as when the suspect fails to convey the proper attitude of compliance (Bowling and Phillips, 2002).

The alternative potential outcome of police stop and search – police use of violence – has long been a focus of popular and scholarly attention in the U.S., but oddly less so in the UK. The former is not surprising given the persistence of the problem in the US: "Like clockwork, every few years, our first brush with police brutality is linked with a contemporary case of police abuse" (Russell-Brown, 2004: 55). Russell-Brown goes on to cite a Department of Justice survey that documents the disproportionate impact of police brutality against people of color. The Mollen Commission Report in 1994 profiling police violence in New York City, and the more recent investigation of widespread brutality and harassment in the Rampart division of the Los Angeles both demonstrate that such abuses of police authority are not the isolated outcomes of "bad apples," but that they are systemic problems that permeate policing.

In contrast to the extensive US literature on police use of violence, the relevant scholarship from the UK is virtually non-existent. Bowling and Phillips (2002) attribute this to the success of police in deflecting attention, and where this fails, blame. As in the US, racial and ethnic minority group members are over-represented in the data on deaths in custody, for example. Yet such deaths are typically constructed as "accidents," or somehow the fault of the victim – due to alcohol, drugs, mental illness, or inappropriately challenging authority (Bowling and Phillips, 2002).

(E)Race-ing Police

The emerging literature on the presence and impact of racism against black police officers in the UK is consistent and convincing. Recent studies of both former and serving officers show the extent to which officers perceived racist behaviour and policies as a normative part of their careers. Holdaway's (2004: 856) succinct summary of the collective findings of research spanning the 1980s and 1990s indicates that such experiences spanned the spectrum from individual acts of racism, to the systemic patterns associated with institutional racism:

Ethnic-minority officers' experience was of frequent prejudice and discrimination, expressed through joking, banter, exclusion from full membership of their work team, little confidence in the willingness or ability of immediate and more senior supervisors to deal with the difficulties they faced, and an acceptance of the virtual inevitability of racism in the police workforce.

Consistently, Holdaway's respondents, and those queried in other similar studies found that officers from BME communities felt that they were seen first as black, or Asian, and then as police officers – their racial status could never quite allow them to fully integrate into their professional status; they were prohibited by virtue of their race from joining the “brotherhood.” Daily reminders in the form of racial “jokes” and epithets combined with the more subtle forms of exclusion to render them perpetual outsiders (Holdaway, 1996; Holdaway and Barron, 1997;

What is more disturbing is the literature subsequent to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, which shows the persistence of a discriminatory culture even in light of concerted efforts to confront and reduce racism in response to the Report's recommendations. A very recent Home Office report compiled by Janet Foster, Tim Newburn, and Anna Souhami (2005) provides insight into changes (or lack thereof) in policing in response to the Inquiry and its recommendations. While the terms of reference were relatively broad, the report does devote attention to the changing experiences of black police officers.

A very interesting paradox emerged from the findings of the report with respect to the use of racist language and bantering. Earlier studies (Holdaway, 1996; HMIC 1997) had found this element of racism to be widespread, and generally not addressed by superiors. In 2004, 5 years after the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, Foster et al. (2005) found that such practices had declined appreciably. The paradox arises in that white officers, in particular, attributed this not to a change in attitudes so much as a “stifling” atmosphere of what they saw as enforced political correctness. Thus, Foster et al. (2005: 38) note the dilemma:

Although the general excision of racist language from the police service is an important and marked change, it raises the question of the extent to which this is indicative of changes in the culture and practices in the police service more broadly.

Not surprisingly, BME officers were quite skeptical of the depth of the change in police culture. While acknowledging the reduced use of offensive language, BME officers nonetheless reported that they continued to experience myriad other forms of exclusionary, isolating, and discomfiting forms of discriminatory behaviour. In short, while the talk had changed, the walk had not. The changes appear to have been merely cosmetic, and not to have taken root in the structural or cultural framework within which officers work.

In light of the above, and in light of the persistently contentious relationship between police and BME communities, it should come as no surprise that black men and women are dramatically under-represented in policing in most western nations. It was not until the late 1960s that the first black officers were sworn in the UK. By 2002, the proportion of BME officers serving across the UK remained at just 3.5%, trailing well below their 8.7% representation in the population (Home Office, 2003). Table 1 below demonstrates the range of under-representation in a variety of Constabularies across the country.

Force	% of population minority ethnic	% of ethnic minority officers
Bedfordshire	10.00	4.5
Greater Manchester	7.58	3.0
Hertfordshire	4.71	1.7
Lancashire	5.00	1.8
Leicestershire	11.00	4.6
Metropolitan Police	25.00	4.9
Nottinghamshire	3.52	3.1
Thames Valley	5.35	2.8
West Midlands	16.11	4.8
West Yorkshire	9.45	3.1

Table 1
Number of minority ethnic officers and resident population 2002²

These dramatic numbers can be attributed in part to the fear of marginalization from one's racial or ethnic community. Interviews conducted by Stone and Tuffin (2000), and by Michael Rowe (2004) reveal that members of BME groups who choose a career in law enforcement are indeed perceived to have betrayed their community.

On the other side of the equation of double marginality is, of course, the anticipation of the reaction of white officers to black or Asian officers. Stone and Tuffin's (2000) study of attitudes of those from BME communities toward police careers found the fear of racism within the profession to be a major prohibiting factor. While the respondents in that study pointed to the likelihood of individualized racism coming from colleagues, they also noted the potential for broader systemic challenges such as lack of or slow promotion through the ranks for people of colour.

Another contributing factor to the difficulties in recruiting black officers is the paucity of role models due to the elevated attrition rates of black officers. Holdaway's (1996; Holdaway and Barron, 1997) work on resigners is seminal in this context. Holdaway and Barron (1997) offer their observations that virtually all black and Asian officers who had resigned from policing did so because of their experiences of prejudice and racism, ranging from the persistent use of stereotypes and racialized language to outright insults and harassment. What cemented their decisions was the lack of action on the part of superiors. That is, the occupational culture of racism was condoned by an indifferent administration. A more recent study on retention (Cooper and Ingram, 2004) indicates that racism within the police service continues to drive officers out. Among the BME officers surveyed,

² Source: Rowe, 2004: 35

half agreed that discrimination – whether against them or against other BME officers or BME communities – conditioned their decision to leave, either by resignation or transfer.

One of the discriminatory practices that undoubtedly influences officers' perceptions of their workplace is limited potential for advancement. Earlier we noted that perceived limits on progression through the ranks were perceived as major disincentives to recruitment of people of colour. And indeed there is substantial evidence to bear this out. It was not until 2003 that the first black Chief Constable was appointed (in Kent). This late occurrence is indicative of the broader patterns of slow progression for black and Asian officers in the police service. Table 2 shows clearly the extent to which minority officers are under-represented, more so as one moves up the level of authority.

Rank	% Minority Ethnic
Constable	2.9
Sergeant	2.0
Inspector	1.6
Chief Inspector	1.5
Superintendent	1.8
Assistant CC	1.3
Chief Constable	1.9

Table 2
Minority ethnic representation by rank 2002³

Additionally, it is apparent that promotion is very slow in coming to those who apply. Bland, Mundy, Russell and Tuffin (1999) found that it took 5 months and 18 months longer for Asian and black officers, respectively, to be promoted than for their white counterparts. And again Foster et al.'s (2005) post-Lawrence assessment suggests that little has changed in this regard. BME officers in that study still believed that progression was stifled for black and Asian candidates, and that even where they were promoted, they were subject to greater scrutiny and oversight.

Our Project

Our ongoing project emerged out of lengthy and myriad conversations with a prominent member of the local BPA, who is now a high ranking member of the national BPA. He expressed the concerns of many of his colleagues that research to date was, paradoxically, both too broad and too narrow - too broad in that it tended to collapse regional and local experiences into national patterns; too narrow in that it tended to focus only on police officers, neglecting the parallel experiences of

³ Source: Home Office, 2003: 19.

police staff. Indeed, his observations seem to be accurate. While much of the extant research has sampled from a handful of Constabularies, the findings gleaned from these regional police services are generally mined for consistent patterns. Too little attention is paid to the specificity of the local dynamics of race within the respective communities and police agencies. The project which is featured in this paper is a localized series of interviews. The longer term goal is to conduct similar sets of interviews in other regional Constabularies, with an eye to uncovering not just the consistent patterns, but also the local distinctions in terms of both experiences and adaptations to racism within the organization.

Another limitation of previous research has been the tendency to focus only on the experiences of police officers, unlike our project, which includes civilian staff as well. Little attention has been paid to other police staff. They too are embedded in the police culture, so are as dramatically affected by individual and systemic discrimination. However, they are also more vulnerable, lacking the status within the organization that would allow them to challenge their (mis)treatment. Moreover, the importance of administrative staff to the daily functioning of the wider organization cannot be overlooked. If they face barriers, it is relatively easy for them to leave the job, resulting in high rates of employee turn-over. The consequences for the police service are wide-ranging in the loss of effective and continuing support services that allow officers to do their job.

Another distinguishing factor for our project is the explicit attention paid to the potential for differential perceptions and experiences of BPA and non-BPA members. Holdaway's (2004) most recent study explored the development of black police associations in the UK. Consequently, his sample was comprised largely of BPA and high ranking police officials. In contrast, we have interviewed BPA and non-BPA members, rank and file police officers, and police support staff. To our knowledge, this is the most comprehensive sample studied to date.

Our initial target for Nottinghamshire was 50 participants. This represents nearly 25% of the more than 200 black police officers and staff in the Constabulary. Soliciting volunteers has been a difficult task. There continues to be reluctance to come forward. Some of those that have participated so far have attributed our initial lack of success to the perception that the project was too closely associated with the BPA. Both non-BPA and inactive BPA members share a certain amount of skepticism about the credibility of the organization, and consequently the legitimacy of the project. We have had to do a considerable amount of public relations work to convince police officers and support staff that while our project has the support of the BPA and the Chief Constable, it is nonetheless independent of both.

Our project was announced to those gathered for a Race and Diversity Conference in Nottingham, sponsored by the Nottinghamshire Police Service on June 29, 2005. It was hoped that this would lead to a rush of interviewees. Not so. No volunteers emerged from that call. The next step was to send emails, then letters directly to black police officers

and staff. Concurrently, the local BPA contact mentioned earlier was making direct contact with staff and officers, encouraging their participation. Once a number of interviews had taken place with 'influential' staff members (executive members of the BPA, high ranking police officers) they were each asked to then try and 'recruit' others to come forward. This snowball approach appeared to have more effect than the letters and emails sent out. The combination of tactics yielded satisfying results, such that our total number of interviews was 29. While below our initial target, this is still nearly 10% of the black and Asian work force. Fourteen serving police officers were interviewed, including eight black males, one black female, three Asian males, and two Asian females. In addition, fifteen support staff were interviewed: four black males, one black female, six Asian males, four Asian females. The range of experience was across the spectrum, from administrative trainees with 4 weeks employment to police inspectors with over twenty years experience with the force. Interestingly, only staff stationed within the city of Nottingham were interviewed, even though the letters of invitation went out to all Nottinghamshire staff. Nottingham city has a high black and minority ethnic community; Nottinghamshire County does not. Therefore the views of BME staff stationed in 'outposts' were not gathered.

On average each interview took one and a half hours to complete. The shortest interview time was 30 minutes; the longest interview time was three hours. They took place in locations that were of the interviewee's choosing, and in private. However, in two instances there were constant interruptions from interviewee's colleagues. The two interviewees believed this to be to try and ascertain what the nature of the interviews were – "two black people in a room together equals conspiracy." No remuneration was offered for participation. However, all prospective participants were informed that they had been given permission to participate by their chief constable.

What we offer in the following pages is a summary and collation of the findings from the interviews. Interestingly, the Nottinghamshire Police Force came out remarkably favourably in terms of recruitment and retention. The chief constable's name came up time and time again as an individual who appeared to be prepared to listen to his staff and the wider community and act accordingly even when this appears to be at odds with traditional policing matters. Indeed, the Nottingham Police force boasts a number of proactive strategies intended to reach out to the diverse Nottingham communities. Participants noted both the Race Equality Scheme and the Positive Action Strategy as indicators of Nottingham Police attention to the historical and systemic problems of racism within policing. Another intriguing initiative was the Achieving More Together race and diversity conference sponsored by Nottingham police in June 2005. The conference featured speakers from within the police hierarchy, but also from within communities affected by police racism – officers and community members alike. It is, perhaps, the symbolism of efforts such as these that accounts for the relative contentment of Nottingham police officers and staff, for their professed experiences and perceptions seemed to be quite distinct from what the extant literature would have us believe. In what follows, we provide a summary of the over-riding themes to emerge from the interviews.

Joining Forces

Reference was made earlier to the dramatic under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in policing in the UK. This is no less the case for Nottingham. In all, racial and ethnic minorities account for less than 4% of the staff and officer workforce of Nottingham police (see Table 3). Of these, Asians make up the largest proportion, at 30 each sworn officers and staff, or 1.38 of the total work force. What is especially disturbing is the invisibility of people of color among high ranking officers. Only one Asian and one black person occupy the rank of Chief Inspector; one black at the level of Superintendent; and one Asian at Chief Superintendent. There are no people of color at a rank above this.

These data suggest that there are few role models available to entice racial and ethnic minority members into policing, or to provide insight and empathy once they are recruited. How is it, then, that black and Asian individuals come to join the police department at all?

For staff and officers alike, the primary motivation for joining Nottingham police was simply for career advancement or stability. Most planned for a long term career in policing. As to why they chose Nottingham specifically, most were largely pragmatic, citing proximity to their home as the primary determinant. A second notable trend was to opt for Nottingham because of its recently acquired reputation as a progressive police force, emphasizing anti-racist policy and practice. They cited the programs noted above, such as the Positive Action Strategy, as evidence of this. One officer stated that, in fact, he would not have opted for a career in law enforcement in any other region of the country.

Interestingly, newer recruits (less than 15 years) suggested that race had not been a factor “one way or the other” in their decision to become police officers. It was neither deterrent nor magnet. In contrast, veterans of the force acknowledged that they had reservations about policing as a career choice, but did their homework before joining. They spoke with those serving at the time and carefully researched the police forces in which they were interested before making the commitment.

This is not to say that individuals were blind to the likelihood that racism might dog their efforts to pursue a career in policing. Most were very much aware of the reality of what is generally referred to as double marginality: the inability of minority officers to be fully accepted into either their own ethnic community, or the police subculture. In other words, officers and staff anticipated the possibility that they might experience some “difficulty in reconciling their cultural and professional goals” (Rowe, 2004: 29). It is highly likely that this accounts, in part, for the under-representation of racial and ethnic minority officers. It was also a factor considered – and experienced – by the officers and staff interviewed. Several indicated that their families and friends were concerned about their joining the force; some even tried to talk them out of their decisions. However, once they followed through, none were in fact estranged from their immediate family or friends. However,

some are subject to ridicule and harassment by other black civilians, especially black youth.

Staff and officers' acceptance by their predominantly white colleagues, however, was not so categorically straightforward. Respondents revealed contradictory and uncertain interpretations of their experiences of racism at the hands of colleagues and superiors. While they acknowledged the persistence of something akin to the "canteen culture," they also acknowledged the ways in which this culture has shifted.

	White	Mixed Raced	Asian	Black	Chinese or Other Ethnicity
Constable	1893	20	27	20	4
Sergeant	381	3	1	1	
Inspector	123				
Chief Inspector	32		1	1	
Superintendent	18			1	
Chief Superintendent	5		1		
Assistant Chief Constable	2				
Deputy Chief Constable	1				
Chief Constable	1				
All Ranks	2456	23	30	23	4
Staff	1707	11	30	20	4
Percentage of Total Workforce	96.23	.77	1.38	.99	.23

* Nottinghamshire Police, *Race and Equality Scheme, Annual Report 2005/2006*

Table 3
Racial and Ethnic Minority Representation Nottinghamshire Police March 2006*

The End of the Canteen Culture?

Interestingly, the term "canteen culture" was dismissed outright by four police officers who insisted that it was an outdated concept. The foundation of this perception was especially obvious in the experiences of long serving officers who had witnessed the transition away from openly racist behaviours they had experienced upon joining the force. A decade or more earlier, these officers were directly confronted with attitudes and behaviours that explicitly told them they did not belong. The same officers were able to recognize how this had changed over the course of their own careers. One stated that

the racists are becoming much more clever....they know that they are being watched so they just disguise their behaviour....it has changed from when I first joined the force with my station super telling me he wanted me off the force and I wouldn't pass my probation....but we still hear of racist comments being made by those who supposedly should know better (Black Male Police Officer).

This is an interesting observation that concurs with the broader findings of racism in British policing. Holdaway's work, for example, highlighted what is perceived by many as more "subtle" forms of racism. Like the general public, racists within the force have learned to tone down their language and behaviour. Another officer corroborates this perspective:

like always attracts like, and those individuals within the police force who have racist opinions always appear to know who each other are and gather together. I have walked into a pub where a number of police officers were gathered and I overheard the racist comments made by two of my white colleagues. Once they saw me, the subject changed. You might be able to have policies to protect us at headquarters, but 'they've' become more covert in their activities (Asian Male Officer).

In spite of the apparent diminishment of overt racism, officers especially felt that they continue to be subject to discrimination in performance evaluations, both informally and formally. One of the most striking themes that emerged across officers was the belief - held by all but one - that they constantly had to prove themselves "twice, if not three times harder" than their white counterparts if they were to be seen as competent and effective officers. Moreover, while none of the officers felt that they were blocked from pursuing different roles within the force, seven felt that they were consistently passed over for promotions that went to what they perceived as less qualified white officers. This appears to be borne out by the aforementioned data on ethnic minority representation across ranks. Thus, while the police force as perceived to have made strides in developing diversity policies, equity schemes, and so forth, there was nonetheless a sense among virtually all officers and staff that the force was paying "lip service" to diversity. As one black male police officer indicated, "there is a policy on everything in this place, but once they are written, it doesn't mean that it [the police service] uses it." Another claimed that "it comes down to numbers...as long as black people and women can be visibly counted, then no other considerations are taken into account....I am often made to feel that now I have got the job, I should just be grateful and get on with it like the rest of them [the white male colleagues]" (Asian Male Police Officer).

Catalysts for Change

It was largely the aforementioned recognition of subtle changes that seemed to allow staff and officers to remain optimistic about their futures within the police force. They acknowledged an identifiable changing of the (old) guard, whereby those with outdated and explicitly racist biases were leaving the force, generally through retirement. They are being replaced by younger recruits who are not only more diverse themselves, but more likely to have been raised in ethnically mixed communities. Consequently, their "cultural reality" is quite distinct from their predecessors, such that the force tends to be reflective

of the community's diversity and values. Indeed, one officer articulated the general sense of most interviewees, saying that "new recruits are more tuned into issues pertaining to race and ethnicity; my white colleagues often are the first to argue for charges against members of the public if they see black colleagues being insulted." A dramatic change indeed

These changes in police culture were also attributed to the efforts of black predecessors on the force. Most noted the importance of the Surinder Singh case as the main catalyst for change, not just in Nottingham but across the nation. One officer stated that "if not for Surinder Singh and others who challenged the racism and the harassment and the lack of opportunity, many of us would not be here. We would still not be wanted, nor would we want, ourselves, to be part of that old way" (Asian male Police Officer).

One of the consequences of the new "racial awareness" initiated by the Singh case was the establishment of Black Police Associations. With respect to the Nottingham BPA, all of those interviewed were at least somewhat supportive of the organization. All who had used the services of the BPA were satisfied with their experience; four police officers and all administrative staff indicated that they would not hesitate to contact the BPA or recommend the same to others in the event of a serious problem. Only three officers stated that they would not use the BPA services, indicating that they thought it was divisive and created barriers between white and black officers and staff.

In spite of the general level of support for the BPA, officers and staff alike indicated a reluctance to pursue formal action against the police force. The shared perception seemed to be that they were better off "not rocking the boat." "Leave well enough alone," said one Asian male officer:

If we challenge insults and things like that at an informal level, we show we can hold our own. But if we go do it formally, we're seen as whiners. If I try to raise issues covering race, I can see "their" eyes rolling to the back of their head as if to say "not again."

Generally, there was a fear of persecution and marginalization should they challenge racist behaviours. This latter point highlights one of the most intriguing patterns arising out of the interviews: the ambiguity represented by equal parts optimism and caution. On the one hand, officers and staff alike have indicated their awareness of the dramatic change in police culture. Gone are the days of blatant racist threats and harassment uncovered in *The Secret Policeman*. Indeed, few reported recent cases of racist language or behaviour on the part of their colleagues. Yet those interviewed also acknowledge a fear that the racism remains latent, ready to rear its head in an instant. They indicated a need to not "rock the boat" so as to ensure the goodwill of their white counterparts. Clearly, the collective memory of the old "canteen network" continues to haunt black officers even in the context of their own relatively unproblematic biographies.

Closing Thoughts

Surprisingly, the comments of the black police officers and staff interviewed in Nottingham suggest that the racist culture identified in so much recent scholarship is

largely lacking in this constabulary. That is not to say that remnants aren't visible. Rather, it implies that, relative to national trends, black officers and staff in Nottingham fare quite well. It appears that their predecessors have successfully fought their battles ahead of them. Indeed, recall that a few officers stated that they would not have chosen police work in any other area, for fear of facing very rigorous barriers on the basis of race.

These unexpected findings suggest two obvious avenues for additional research. First, a more comprehensive examination of race relations in Nottingham is warranted. The constabulary has taken important steps to reduce racism within the organization. Yes such initiatives are rarely successful if they are developed in an otherwise hostile or inhospitable climate. In spite of the history of racial conflict in Nottingham, officers and staff perceived their community to be a relatively tolerant one. The next step of the research agenda, then, is to look more closely at the racial dynamics of the community in which Nottingham officers live and work. What is it about Nottingham that enables black officers to succeed, when so many have been pushed out elsewhere?

Related to this are a series of local interviews within other UK constabularies. Conducting similar research in other areas will enable researchers to determine whether Nottingham is, in fact, unique, and if so, what factors might account for this. Such a project would move beyond a single case study approach, to a comparative analysis. And unlike Holdaway's previous work, would allow us to look at situationally specific dynamics, rather than identifying global trends that might not reflect local realities.

This project has been an initial stepping stone on the way to a more subtle and nuanced understanding of the place and space of black officers in the UK. The surprising findings suggest that there is merit in exploring the community specific experiences of black officers in the UK.

References

- Black, D. (1980). *The Manners and Customs of the Police*. New York: Academic Press.
- Bland, N., Mundy, G., Russell, J., and Tuffin, R. (1999). *The Career Progression of Minority Ethnic Police Officers*. London: Home Office.
- Bowling, B., and Phillips, C. (2002). *Racism, Crime and Justice*. Harrow UK: Longman.
- Cooper, C., and Ingram, S. (2004). *Retention of Police Officers: A study of resignations and transfers in ten forces*. London: Home Office.
- Cunneen, C. (2001). *Conflict, Politics and Crime: Aboriginal Communities and the Police*. Sydney AUS: Allen and Unwin.
- Foster, J., Newburn, T. and Souhami, A. (2005). *Assessing the Impact of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. London: Home Office.
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (1997). *Winning the Race: Policing Plural Communities*. London: Home Office.
- Holdaway, S. (2004). The Development of Black Police Associations: Changing Articulations of Race Within the Police. *British Journal of Criminology*, 44, pp. 854-865.
- Holdaway, S. (1996). *The Racialisation of British Policing*. Basingstoke UK: Macmillan
- Holdaway, S., and Barron, A.-M. (1997). *Resigners? The Experience of Black and Asian Police Officers*. Basingstoke UK: Macmillan.
- Home Office (2004). *Race and the Criminal Justice System: An Overview to the Complete Statistics 2002-2003*. London: Home Office.
- Home Office (2003). *Race Equality: The Home Office Secretary's Employment Target*. London: Home Office.
- Home Office (2000). *Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System 2000*. London: Home Office.
- Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (Nd). *Justice on Trial: Racial Disparities in the American Criminal Justice System*. Washington DC: LCCR. Retrieved on November 10, 2005, from <http://www.civilrights.org/publications/reports/cj/>.
- MacPherson, Sir William (1999). *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. London: HMSO.

- Neugebauer, R. (1999). First Nations People and Law Enforcement: Community Perspectives on Police Response. In M. Corsianos and K. Train (eds.). *Interrogating Social Justice: Politics, Culture and Identity*. Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Scholar's Press. Pp. 247-269.
- Rowe, M. (2004). *Policing, Race and Racism*. Devon UK: Willan.
- Russell-Brown, K. (2004). *Underground Codes*. New York: New York University Press
- Stone, V. and Tuffin, R. (2000). *Attitudes of People from Minority Ethnic Communities Towards a Career in the Police Service*. London: Home Office.
- Whitfield, J. (2004). *Unhappy Dialogue: The Metropolitan Police and black Londoners in post-war Britain*. Devon UK: Willan.

Copyright of The Internet Journal of Criminology