

Ethics, Race Relations, and Law Enforcement

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The University of San Diego Law Enforcement and Public Safety 500 Course (Issues in Law Enforcement) Module 3 focused on Ethics, Race Relations, and Law Enforcement. In response to this week's assignment, this paper will analyze a speech given by former FBI Director James Comey at Georgetown University (2015) and an article titled "Behind the Badge" by Pew Research Center (2017). This paper will seek to find themes that are both complementary and contradictory across each source, as well as analyze messages common to both.

Given his position as Director of the FBI, it is natural for Comey to take a national "macro" perspective when analyzing race relations and law enforcement. At the beginning of his speech, Director Comey defined the relationship between Law Enforcement and the communities they protect as "complicated." He illustrated this point by pointing not only to events surrounding Michael Brown and Eric Garner but also to the events surrounding Rafael Ramos and Wenjain Liu. He also briefly touched on American History, which includes slavery in the early years and struggles for civil rights in recent History.

The core of Comey's speech centers around four main ideas. First: Law enforcement has a role in "black history," and because of that, all in law enforcement need to admit some history is not pretty. Second: While unconscious bias is unavoidable, the actions after the bias are entirely in control of the individual. Third: Although almost all people select a profession of law enforcement to help, over time, some members develop bias and cynicism. Fourth: It is easy to perceive the judicial system as being "racist;" however, below the surface racial groups face challenges due to a lack of opportunity, due to tragedies in American History, and due to the cyclical nature of incarceration. Because of this, the real challenge is for both communities and law enforcement to engage in conversation and discussion with the goals of understanding, willingness to listen, and the ability to move past anger and see things through a "constructive lens."

Director Comey does offer several starting points to begin the discussions he mentioned. Director Comey was in favor of gathering data on instances of deadly force, which included Body-Worn Camera systems. He also saw a need for officers to conduct foot patrols in communities to talk to people, but he also acknowledged that several departments are struggling with staffing. Comey asked, "Do we know the people we serve?" and on the opposite perspective commented, "It is hard to hate up close."

While Director Comey approached race relations and law enforcement with a macro national view, Pew Research Center tackled the problem with a local "micro" view in their article "Behind the Badge." Much of the data collected by the Pew Research Center corroborated statements made in the speech given by Director Comey. The Pew article noted that approximately 86% of officers identified a lack of human resources needed to police the community properly. A similar percentage of officers (68%) also noted they had not conducted a foot patrol in the past month. Although parallels were not drawn in the Pew article, the data supports comments by Director Comey. The data also shows universal support for data in the form of Body-Worn Camera systems. The last data point which greatly supported the view of Director Comey was that more than half of the officers surveyed reported becoming more callous toward people since taking their job.

The data from Pew Research Center, which appeared to contradict Director Comey's speech, were the views of officers and the public on whether the deaths of blacks at the hands of isolated police incidents or a widespread problem. While Director Comey pointed out early on law enforcement and black History have been intertwined and shaped by adverse events since the inception of the country, the Pew Research Center showed approximately 2/3 of police officers view these incidents as isolated. Additionally, the Pew report showed that 83% of the surveyed public claimed to understand police work, while 86% of surveyed police claimed the public did not.

If the speech from Director Comey and the Pew Research article are combined, several themes develop. Views and perceptions of race relations and law enforcement vary dramatically between the public and law enforcement communities. To complicate matters, both the police and the civilian populations believe they understand the other side's viewpoints and perceptions, and furthermore, the police themselves admit becoming calloused toward the population they serve over time. Although each side does agree to increased data collection in the form of Body-Worn Camera systems, ultimately, data does not bring understanding.

In Law Enforcement, non-confrontational encounters can only happen through consensual encounters with the public – not through detentions or arrests. Law Enforcement officers are by default in a leadership role in communities they serve. Listening to the public through a constructive lens, understanding racial challenges, and sharing personal perspectives is most useful outside the patrol vehicle. Face to face consensual encounters allows officers to know the people they serve and allows the public to know the human behind the badge. In the words of Director Comey, "It is hard to hate up close. The challenge of realizing these changes remains the lack of human resources. Reduced staffing creates difficulty in finding a balance between calls for service and proactive community-based policing. Ultimately the change requires trust from the public to support law enforcement personnel efforts and trust from law enforcement to realize the public needs something more than bad guys going to jail. The public wants a conversation with the local law enforcement members who serve them.

Resources:

Comey, J. (2015, February 12). James Comey Georgetown University Speech. Retrieved from <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4528067/james-comey-full-speech>

Morin, R., Parker, K., Stepler, R., & Mercer, A. (2017, January 11). Behind the Badge. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/01/11/behind-the-badge/>