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# Investigating perceptions of race and ethnic diversity among prospective police officers

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## ABSTRACT

Many have suggested police diversity will improve police-community relations, but research testing this hypothesis is inconclusive. We investigated perceptions of police race, ethnicity, and diversity in a heterogeneous sample of prospective police officers. Data are drawn from interviews with 42 criminal justice college students in the Southwestern United States, of which 15 were Hispanic, and who each wanted to become a police officer. Participants supported diversity in policing, and collectively expressed a belief that race plays a central role in policing today. Furthermore, participants expressed support for the ideals of both passive and active representative bureaucracy. Hispanics in the sample in particular anticipated they would positively affect police relations in Hispanic neighborhoods and encourage immigrants to cooperate with police.

## KEYWORDS

Police; race; ethnicity; diversity; interviews; Hispanic; representative bureaucracy

## Introduction

Police diversity has long been suggested as a means to improve police-citizen relationships, particularly in minority communities. Fifty years ago, the Kerner Commission (1968) recommended American police departments hire more minority officers to reduce racial bias in use of force. More recently, a recommendation from Former President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing's (2015) was to promote diversity within police agencies, suggesting that a department that is more representative of the community will be in a better position to relate to its citizens, build trust, and promote compliance. Similar recommendations have been made globally in response to allegations of racism and discriminatory police practices (Carter, 1986). Despite some increases in diversification in the past few decades, minorities are still

underrepresented on police forces and police relationships with poor and minority communities remain one of society's most poignant social problems (Reaves, 2015). More research is needed examining the barriers of police diversification, as well as its impact on these critical social problems. This is particularly true for Hispanic minority police officers, who have been largely absent from the existing research on police diversity (McCluskey & McCluskey, 2004). This research gap is highly problematic in the United States given that Hispanics are the largest minority citizen group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

The goal of this paper was to investigate the benefits of and barriers to police diversity from the perspective of prospective police officers, to uncover their motivations for becoming officers, and their perceptions of how their own race would influence their experience as police officers. To do so, we interviewed a diverse sample of college educated prospective police officers. Participants were mostly Hispanic; although Native American, black, Middle Eastern, Asian, and mixed-race participants were also represented. Our focus on the Hispanic perspective adds critical insight to ethnic motivations for becoming police officers – particularly as the majority of research to date has focused on the black vs.white distinction. As the next generation of American law enforcement officers, criminal justice college students could yield critical information in promoting police diversification (Austin & Hummer, 2000; Price & Sokoloff, 2004; Yim, 2009). Given recruitment challenges police departments are currently facing, the perspectives of these individuals are crucial. They may soon translate into practice as these individuals transition from college students to police officers.

## **Diversity within police agencies**

According to the 2013 Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey, 27% of U.S. police officers in local agencies are racial or ethnic minorities, with blacks and Hispanics each accounting for 12% (Reaves, 2015). The remaining 3% is comprised of Asian officers (2%) and 'other' (1%) These numbers reflect a 2% increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of police departments since the 2007 LEMAS. Though these percentages appear to be in line with nationwide population breakdowns, there is noted variation in minority representation across departments (Kelly, 2015; Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017; Ozkan, Worrall, & Piquero, 2016). For example, departments serving cities with larger Hispanic citizen populations tend to be more diverse (Alozie & Ramirez, 1999; Walker, 1983; Zhao, He, & Lovrich, 2005). McCluskey and McCluskey (2004) found cities with established and substantial populations (25% or more) of Latino citizens in 1990 were four times more likely to experience increases in Latino representation in law enforcement in 2000. However, departments that experienced high growth in populations of Latino citizens in 1990 were significantly less likely to see increases in Latino representation in law enforcement, suggesting that agency hiring lags slowly behind population trends. Further, while larger police departments in the U.S. tend to be more diverse, they often serve cities with far more minority citizens than represented in the general population.

As such, minority officers are still underrepresented in comparison to the clientele they serve. For example, the Phoenix Police Department is made up of 13% Hispanics (roughly equivalent to the proportion of Hispanics in the general U.S. population) and yet there is a 41% Hispanic representation in the population of Phoenix itself.

## **Representative bureaucracy**

Experts have long suggested that hiring minority officers will be beneficial because these officers have a better understanding of minority communities, a stronger stake in the safety of these areas, and may improve citizen perceptions of police (Decker & Smith, 1980; Kerner Commission, 1968). More broadly, Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) argued that the values of one social group will be inevitably distinct from another, emphasizing the importance of representativeness in the police force, particularly in heterogeneous areas. These recommendations are grounded in a representative bureaucracy framework, which examines the impact of representativeness on outcomes involving constituents of various backgrounds. Representative bureaucracy differentiates between passive and active representation of minority bureaucrats in organizations. Passive representation refers to organizations hiring employees with minority backgrounds to match proportions among the served clientele, while active representation occurs when employees use their status in the organization to promote the interests of the minority groups they represent (Wilkins & Williams, 2008, 2009). The concept of critical mass under the representative bureaucracy framework suggests that active representation is only possible once the number of minority bureaucrats becomes large enough to advocate on behalf of the groups they represent (Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson-Crotty, & Fernandez, 2017).

Research testing this framework in a police context has produced mixed results. Some scholars found that simply hiring minority bureaucrats is enough, as long as members of that minority group believe the bureaucrats' shared experience will influence their actions (Theobald & Haider-Markel, 2009). Others however conclude that merely hiring minority police officers in an attempt to improve minority relations will be ineffective; a true remedy requires active representation of minority officers who could influence positive change over time (Brunson & Gau, 2015; Paoline, Gau, & Terrill, in press). For example, research examining the potential of representative bureaucracy to explain police killings of black citizens suggests that simply hiring more black officers is not enough to reduce these incidents or the resulting public outcry they generate (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017).

## **Barriers to increasing police diversity**

Significant barriers to increasing diversity exist (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing's, 2015; Shjarback, Decker, Rojek, & Brunson, forthcoming; White & Fradella, 2016) particularly in communities where trust in police is low, making citizens less likely to apply for these positions (EEOC, 2016). Agencies attempting to achieve even passive representation of minorities in their ranks can experience difficulties due to

insufficient recruitment. When minority citizens do apply they are disproportionately impacted by screening criteria such as educational requirements and restrictions on past brushes with the law (Carter & Sapp, 1991; Pane, 2016). For example, while scholars have found few differences between minority and white individuals' motivations for becoming a police officer (Raganella & White, 2004; White, Cooper, Saunders, & Raganella, 2010), minorities who do choose to apply could be subjected to screening processes that disproportionately impact them and could unintentionally screen them out. Research has shown a limited number of black recruits successfully complete field training (Bolton, 2003). Thus, those minorities who do apply and complete the recruitment process could be unique in their acceptance of prevailing social norms (i.e., they more closely resemble the current police demographic; Lasley, Larson, Kelso, & Brown, 2011). Much of this research has focused on the experiences of black and women police officers, calling attention to the need for studies of Hispanic and other minority groups.

Challenges in promoting police diversity are not limited to recruitment. Interviews conducted with fifty black officers from sixteen southern police agencies identified a social distance between black and white officers in the same agency, despite common arguments that all officers are 'blue' (Bolton, 2003). Respondents suggested that racism is institutionalized in the agency to the extent that black officers feel like outsiders. Another study found internally generated complaints filed against officers in a Midwestern department disproportionately involved minority officers, but these same officers were not disproportionately represented amongst citizen complaints (Rojek & Decker, 2009). The authors offered a few explanations: non-minority officers could file internal complaints against minority officers in order to reduce competition for departmental resources (e.g., promotions and favorable assignments), officers could be more likely to file complaints against minority officers because minority officers do not adhere to traditional police culture, or minority officers could be more likely to engage in misconduct. The latter is unlikely given that minority officers were not overrepresented in citizen complaints. Minority officers are also reportedly skeptical of the underlying intentions for their recruitment and hiring. Cashmore (2002) interviewed black and Asian police officers serving in Britain for their opinions regarding the major assumptions about the benefits of recruiting minority officers. Participants largely believed the value of cultural diversity stemmed from projecting an image to the public – what the author called 'window dressing' – rather than from any substantive impact on the public good. The officers believed diversification policies were 'pernicious in that they contrive to give the appearance of progress, while actually achieving little' (p. 327).

Research on disparities in police leadership shows differences in both the prevalence and perceptions of promotions based on officer race. Over half of black officers in the 2013 LEMAS reported that white officers are more likely to be given better assignments and promotions than minority officers (Reaves, 2015). In the same study, 19% of Hispanic officers and 1% of white officers agreed with these statements. Seventy-six percent of a sample of black officers reported differential promotions as an

organizational barrier black officers face (Bolton, 2003) and yet black officers represent the minority group most likely to be promoted. For example, representation of Hispanics in police supervisory positions lags far behind black officers (Alderden, Farrell, & McCarty, 2017). Carter's (1986) investigation of Hispanic police officers' work experiences uncovered that Hispanic officers feel discriminated against by both members of their employing organization as well as by the general public. In terms of organizational discrimination, Hispanic officers reported hiring and promotion practices in their organization favored the advancement of white officers' careers. Challenges in attaining promotions can also be tied to a lack of mentorship or role models for minority officers, which can limit their professional development and promotional opportunities (EEOC, 2016).

### **Potential consequences of police diversification**

Despite these barriers, a number of agencies have undertaken diversification efforts and have noted benefits to the organization and in their relationships with minority communities as a result (EEOC, 2016). Prior research has suggested that greater diversity among police is associated with reduced racial disparity in police arrest decisions (McCrary, 2007), improved minority perceptions of police (Weitzer, 2000), and reduced racial tensions between police and communities (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). A national evaluation of the role of demographic and organizational influences on police culture found that black officers are more supportive of agency administration and community policing strategies, and less supportive of the need for physical toughness and misconduct than their white counterparts; Hispanic officers shared these same attitudes, but to a much lesser magnitude (Cordner & Cordner, 2017). Black representation in police leadership is associated with positive impacts on perceptions of organizational fairness for all officers (Alderden et al., 2017). The same findings did not persist for Hispanic representation in police leadership, which could be attributed to the rarity of this occurrence in comparison to black leadership. Furthermore, both black and Hispanic officers report higher levels of job satisfaction than their white counterparts (Alderden et al., 2017).

Though diversification can have numerous benefits, it is also important to consider the unintended consequences of these efforts. Research has found that officers who are demographically different than their administration also have attitudinal differences toward the severity of misconduct (Maskaly, Donner, & Fridell, 2017). This suggests that diversifying only the top or bottom ranks could have the unintended consequence of creating distance between officers and their top leadership, who will be less able to influence these officers. Based on these results, it may be important to diversify departments at all levels of command. Another potential consequence of diversification is concern regarding reduced hiring standards (such as lowering educational requirements and forgiving prior drug use, bad credit, or minor criminal history; Pane, 2016). This is a controversial issue, as many would argue that relaxing the military-style standards to attract more minorities will result in overall benefits to the

police profession (EEOC, 2016). On the other hand there exists a perception that reduced standards could result in a 'lesser' police force and more misconduct (see, e.g., White, 2014), and that diversification should be driven by increased recruitment efforts (Comeau, 2011). An even more alarming potential consequence of diversification is reported by a few studies who have found diversity is associated with higher crime rates (Lott, 2000) and more police-caused homicides (Smith, 2003). However, interpretation of these findings should be caveated with the fact that increased officer diversity is more likely in large urban cities with higher crime rates, arguably making it difficult to tease out the specific consequence of increased numbers of minority officers on crime.

Research on the role of officer race on decision-making is inconclusive. Alpert, Dunham, and MacDonald (2004) found that officers are more likely to use higher levels of force against suspects perceived as having less authority than the officer, based on the race or age of the suspect. Similarly, Paoline and colleagues (in press) found that white officers are more likely to use higher levels of force against black citizens, while black officers' use of force behaviors were unrelated to suspect race. Research addressing the role of officer race on traffic enforcement behaviors has produced mixed findings (Rojek, Rosenfeld, & Decker, 2012; Wilkins & Williams, 2009; Withrow, 2004). For example, researchers have found that increased representation of minority groups in police departments did *not* result in lower disparities for these groups in traffic stops (Shjarback et al., forthcoming). Some suggest this is because there is increased pressure on minority officers to fit in, resulting in these officers engaging in the same behaviors as white officers (Wilkins & Williams, 2009). On the other hand, Rojek et al. (2012) found black drivers who were stopped were more likely than white drivers stopped to be searched, particularly if the officer was white.

The impact of officer race on citizen perceptions of police is also mixed. Paoline and colleagues (in press) found that the likelihood that a citizen resisted the police was not affected by the race of the officer involved. In terms of citizen violence against police, Ozkan et al. (2016) found that increased diversity was not associated with increases in assaults on officers. Thus, suggestions that black citizens respond more positively to black police officers may not be supported, despite evidence of less racially-motivated policing on the part of black officers. This finding is in line with others challenging conventional wisdom that minority citizens will look more favorably on minority officers. For example, Weitzer (2000) conducted in-depth interviews with Washington D.C. residents and found that black citizens' perceptions of black officers were at times less positive than their perceptions of white officers:

It's amazing but White officers are far more courteous to Black people than Black officers are...The White officer, when he come to you [he says], 'I'm sorry sir, but you ran that red light,' or 'Sir, you're doing this, that, and the other thing.' But the Black officer, he's in charge, you see. It's because of the oppression that he comes up under... Not all of them are like that, but I would say maybe 80 percent

of the Black ones... I think that's the main thing, the arrogance that Black officers have about being in authority. (p. 317)

however, in a study of perceptions of legitimacy in traffic stops, black drivers were significantly more likely to perceive the stop as legitimate if they were stopped by a black officer as opposed to a white officer (Theobald & Haider-Markel, 2009). More broadly, improved minority relations is one of the dominant arguments for police diversification. Although some research does support this, others have found that black officers are less likely than white and Hispanic officers to report positive relationships with black and Hispanic citizens in their communities (Morin et al., 2017). In understanding why hiring black officers does not necessarily increase citizen perspectives of the police, Decker and Smith (1980) offer two explanations; first, that the police subculture demands loyalty that outweighs the racial ties of black officers (the 'not white or black but blue' argument), or second, that a better understanding of black culture by black officers does not translate into active representation of this group. As such, Decker and Smith's (1980) findings directly address the tenet of representative bureaucracy requiring more than passive representation of minority bureaucrats to achieve community satisfaction.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

Data are drawn from 42 one-on-one interviews with criminology and criminal justice undergraduate and graduate students from a large Southwestern American university. All participants were recruited via e-mail and/or the school's Facebook page. These students were sampled because each reported plans to become a police officer after graduation. This purposive sample was selected because past research has tended to focus on individuals who have already submitted an application, while this sample reflects individuals who might ultimately decide against this career path (Todak, 2017). Each person received a \$5 coffee gift card for participating. The majority of respondents identified as White (n = 19) or Hispanic (n = 15). The remainder of the sample consisted of those identifying as Native American (n = 2), Black (n = 1), Asian (n = 1), Middle Eastern (n = 1), or mixed race (n = 1). Most respondents were female (n = 28). The sample ranged in age from 18 to 25 years old. Three of the male respondents reported being married and four of respondents had children. Twenty-three of the respondents held part-time employment in addition to their coursework and nine of the respondents maintained full-time employment.

### **Procedures**

Interviews were conducted during the fall 2014, spring 2015, and fall 2015 semesters as part of a larger study of college educated prospective police officers. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. A semi-structured questionnaire involving a diverse set of questions was used to guide the interviews. The questions were designed to elicit a comprehensive understanding of each respondent's



motivations for wanting to become a police officer, expectations about what the job would be like, and methods used to prepare themselves for the work (see Appendix 1).

## **Research questions and analysis**

The current study asked two research questions: (1) What do prospective officers perceive are the benefits and drawbacks of race/ethnic diversity in police agencies? and (2) How do prospective officers perceive their own race/ethnicity will impact their future careers? Note that the second research question allowed us to delve into the 'active vs. passive representation' debate within the representative bureaucracy framework by eliciting participant feedback on whether and how they believed their own demographic makeup would affect police-community relations.

All interviews were audio-recorded with subject permission and transcribed verbatim. They were then entered and analyzed in QSR NVivo 11 for Mac (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia). The analysis focused specifically on participants' answers to the following survey questions:

- Do you think your race/ethnicity will influence your work experience?
- Do you think your race/ethnicity will influence how you are treated by citizens?
- Do you think your race/ethnicity will influence how you are treated by superiors?
- Do you think your race/ethnicity will influence your work/life balance?

Participant's discussions of race and ethnicity in response to more general questions were also coded. For example, many responded to the questions 'What motivated you to become a police officer' and 'What challenges do you think you will face as a police officer?' in racially specific terms. Overall, the analysis offers subjects' accounts of the benefits and drawbacks of being a white or minority officer, and of racial diversity in policing generally.

## **Results**

Interviews revealed participants' mixed feelings about the issue of racial and ethnic diversity in policing, as they reported both benefits and drawbacks. Overall these findings highlight participants' beliefs that race plays a major role in dictating the outcomes of police-citizen encounters.

### **Benefits of racial and ethnic diversity in policing**

In general, participants felt racial diversity in policing benefited American society. They reported minority police officers increase the overall approachability of the police for minority citizens and communities (suggesting support of passive representation within the representative bureaucracy framework). Citizens were thought to be more trusting and open with officers who share the same life experiences through common

heritage, culture, upbringing, language, and skin color. For these reasons, minority officers are also better able to patrol diverse, poor, racially tense, or high crime neighborhoods because they develop stronger community relationships and generally have more of the public's support in these areas. According to participants, simply sharing the same skin color or ethnic heritage can help an officer earn a citizen's trust: 'The Hispanics might take more of a liking to someone who looked more Hispanic than a Caucasian...A black citizen or an African American citizen might make more of a connection with an African American police officer rather than a Caucasian' (Hispanic Female). Minority officers also may feel more confident and willing to interact with minority citizens who share their culture or skin color.

A lot of [cops] have no experience with minorities, but the fact that I do kind of gives me that boost in confidence to say like hey we have something in common, and we can sort this out. (Hispanic Female)

My mom was born and raised in Mexico so like I know what it is to live in a rural Mexican community. So I think I could definitely connect with the people in the community and talk to them and be like nah, I'm not some priss just trying to boss you around. I actually know what you're living. (Hispanic Female)

Hispanic participants in particular reported their bilingual skills would be beneficial in policing. Spanish-speaking participants wanted to break down the language barrier between white officers and Hispanic citizens that they felt was currently straining police-citizen relations in the Southwestern United States. A Hispanic female summarized this problem: 'It's hard to communicate with somebody when you can't speak their language.' Spanish-speaking participants also thought they could increase cooperation and trust between police and immigrants, a population they said is often hesitant to cooperate with law enforcement (suggesting support of active representation within the representative bureaucracy framework).

Being Hispanic, and bilingual too, I can take calls that other people who don't speak Spanish can't. And I feel like it just opens up possibilities to people I can help. Like I can help the immigrants who don't call police that often. That's the people I wanna help and give a voice to. (Hispanic Female)

I think if I speak to a person that only speaks Spanish, I think that they won't be so intimidated just because they can talk to me on a personal level, not like try to talk in English and think that they're gonna mess something up for themselves by talking to me. (Hispanic Female)

Minority participants felt they would be better able to respond to culturally specific calls for service in ways that produce greater understanding between the cops and citizens, and ultimately more peaceful outcomes. The following quote professes a belief that a Hispanic police officer – or at least someone who has experience with Hispanic culture – might be better able to respond effectively and peacefully to a noise complaint about a Mexican birthday party.

If you already know that [in Mexican culture] there's always the big parties, then you're not gonna make a huge big deal – oh my God what are they doing? – it's like oh well I understand you're having a party, but can you keep the music down because you're disturbing the peace? ... So I think if I would've gotten like a Spanish-speaking police officer...Or somebody who had been to a Mexican birthday party before...You're not gonna be all rude about it, you're gonna be like please turn the music down, your neighbors are trying to sleep. Cause there's nothing wrong with having a party, but the music's too loud. (Hispanic Female)

Some white participants agreed that having a diverse force of police officers with varying life experiences would improve the chances that the police department could protect all neighborhoods equally and help any citizen who needs the police. A few said that because they were 'sheltered' and had little experience with violent crime, they were concerned they would not be able to connect with people who experience violence in their daily lives. One white female participant said she did not think her skin color would affect her job 'unless you're in ...a very low income area where maybe a lot of people aren't white so...there's a little bit more racial tension in that area. I didn't grow up in an area like that...from what I understand there's a lot of issues going on there.'

In addition to improving the nature of one-on-one interactions, participants said that diversifying the police could lessen animosity across entire communities. In American culture white police officers are often accused of bias-driven decision-making. To many citizens, white police officers represent the dominance and oppression of the police institution: 'White people are already deemed as racist just because of the color of their skin, even though you don't know their character.' As such, when interacting with white officers citizens are 'gonna see it as the man's trying to keep them down, vs. we're just trying to help' (White Female). Alternatively, participants felt that a minority police officer is less likely to be perceived as racially biased because he or she is also a member of a historically oppressed group.

I hope they'll see me as one of them and that way they'll see if I do have to [enforce the law] I hope they see it as legitimate. It's not coming from a faceless entity but rather a person who sees with them, but at the same time still has to do their job... I'm very in touch with my heritage, so I hope that they'll sense that and be more open towards me. (Hispanic Male)

If you're a Caucasian responding to Down South there tends to be African Americans, Hispanics, different populations, more so than Caucasians. I have heard a lot of them say it's because I'm black. I would assume if it was an African American or Hispanic officer responding to that call, they wouldn't be able to say something like that. (White Female)

A final benefit of police diversity reported by participants was that minority officers represent tangible social ties between minority neighborhoods and the police. One female participant highlighted that in some neighborhoods families are large, social ties

are strong, and everybody knows everybody else. If one of those residents becomes a police officer, then that creates a binding tie between the neighborhood and the police department. This tie can increase cooperation and trust between the entire neighborhood and the officers serving it.

Our culture, we're very tight knit. We have family and we're very supportive. We have a huge network...So me being an officer...I think it kinda links us, links the community, like the people we know...They'll change their mind of how they see police. (Hispanic Female)

As this quote illustrates, the benefits of hiring even one minority officer may have a widespread positive effect that reaches a large portion of the community. In fact, each of the benefits reported by the sample was projected for society in general. Namely, they believed minority officers improve police-citizen relations and lessen racial tension in American policing.

### **The drawbacks of diversity in policing**

The drawbacks of police diversity reported by the sample focused primarily on the negative impact the profession can have on the individual officer. Racial/ethnic minority participants reported concerns about being exposed to racism, particularly if they were assigned to work in a white or upper-class neighborhood. They gave several explanations for this problem. First, a minority officer may stand out as unusual in a white area. 'If I were to go with Mesa or Chandler [Arizona], it's white people. So they would be like what're you doing here, you know? You don't belong here. Like that black dot' (Black Female). White residents in these areas may also either not respect the authority of a minority officer, or may view the minority officer as an 'enemy' who has been given 'too much power.'

If the person is of a different race, and their race is superior, I feel like they won't really abide by the rules that I'm trying to lay down...Cause I feel like a person in [white area] that has lighter skin would feel like they're above me and above the law. (Black Female)

With the terrorist attacks and ISIS and things like that...technically I'm the enemy. If I was darker or if I had an accent where people could actually tell my race, I think that would definitely change the way people would respect me. Only because it would just look like the enemy is getting too much power...I'm hoping that it wouldn't affect anything at work but that would be ignorant to say cause I know it would be. (Middle Eastern Female)

Participants reported several additional problems that minority police officers may face, one of which was that citizens might expect preferential treatment from them as a 'fellow minority.' One participant said 'If I were to maybe pull over a Mexican, they'd think I'd be more lenient on them' (Hispanic Male). This could be uncomfortable for the officer and ultimately create more tension if the officer refuses to make the expected concessions.

Additionally, both white and minority participants expressed concerns about reduced hiring standards. Minorities felt reduced standards opened them up to criticism from other officers who may feel they were not judged based on merits but were only hired to boost diversity. White participants similarly said they hoped they were viewed as having earned promotions or accolades, rather than having been given them for simply fitting a traditional police demographic.

I would hope that [as Hispanics] we wouldn't get preference, that I would be evaluated on my skills and on my training, and on my resume, rather than my ethnicity. For who I am. Cause I know one of the female officers said that she got picked because she was a female, and not because she did that great in training...I would want somebody to say I got picked because I tried my hardest and I did the best. Not because I was a female. (Hispanic Female)

I would really hope that just because of my race...somebody doesn't look at me as more valuable or less valuable based upon that. I want it to be a thing of merit, if I earn praise or I somehow earn myself a complaint, I hope it's based upon my actions and not my skin color. (White Male)

Interviews also revealed intersectional issues, primarily among minority women in the sample. These women shared that it had been harder to convince their families of their desire to become police officers due to their culture's gendered views on appropriate career choices for women.

In my culture, I'm a woman, I need to be the child bearer and I should be this pretty little girl cooking dinner every day. That's just in my culture. Ideally my parents would like me to have an office job, a desk job, or like a marketing job where I wear heels all day and just talk to people. That's what they would love me to do, but that's not me and they kind of are starting to come to terms with that...I took a written test and I told my parents that I had taken the written test, that's when they started taking me seriously and that's when, I guess, all hell broke loose...They're coming to terms with it now. Originally, no, they did not want that because they didn't think that a woman should be a police officer. (Middle Eastern Female).

My parents are the typical, traditional Mexicans where men work outside. I work inside. My mom's the one that works inside. So they don't really agree on it, they're like no the guy's the one that's supposed to be outside working. What if you get shot, what if you get killed? (Hispanic Female)

Many white participants also thought they would experience hostility directed against them because of their race. However, while minority participants worried about being victims of racism, white participants largely believed would be stereotyped as racist. White men in the sample in particular expressed that they fit the stereotype of the white man exercising unwarranted authority over the black man. As such, they worried that they would be vulnerable to accusations of bias and receive more citizen complaints.

Being a white guy, blonde hair, blue eyes. I'm like what would be viewed as the racist guy I guess by a lot of minority groups. It's hard because I'm not that person...It's honestly a little frightening to me (White Male).

I think if you're pulling over a Mexican person or a black person or anyone else that's not white they're gonna look at you as being racist because all they see is you pulling over them. They're not seeing you pull over anyone else or have a contact with someone else. So...depending on how your interaction is with them, you're probably gonna have more complaints against you. (White male)

In summary, both minority and white participants were concerned about how citizens would respond to their own skin color or cultural heritage, although for different reasons. These findings on the perceived drawbacks to diversity in policing, combined with the findings on perceived benefits of the same, suggest that the sample believed race would feature prominently in their future career as a police officer.

## **Discussion**

Hiring more minority officers is frequently suggested as a means to improve police-community relations. Previous research has found few differences across racial groups in terms of motivations for becoming a police officer, and research on the impact of officer race on officer behavior and citizen perceptions of police is inconclusive. To shed light on this issue, we tackled it from the perspective of the prospective police officer to try and understand how the next generation of men and women joining the police profession perceive racial diversity in policing. We further investigated their perceptions of how their own racial/ethnic makeup will influence their future careers to uncover potential benefits and drawbacks of diversification. We found that regardless of whether participants were white, minority, male, or female, they believed race and ethnicity feature prominently in policing today and that their own demographic makeup would significantly impact their work experiences.

With regards to the representative bureaucracy framework, participants in this study reported a belief in the importance of passive representation of minorities – that minority officers can improve relations with citizens simply because they look the same and come from a similar background and therefore share histories and understandings. Minority participants said their own racial or ethnic background would improve the way minority citizens interacted with them. They felt more confident in the idea of policing neighborhoods that matched their own demographic makeup. They also believed, more generally, that passive representativeness produces strong societal benefits and improves police-community relationships. They believed that 'matched pairs' – when officers interacted with citizens of the same race – had more positive interactions and that minority officers were better equipped to respond to calls in minority communities. In general then this sample is consistent with previous arguments (Kerner Commission, 1968; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing's, 2015) that even passive diversity can relieve racialized tensions in U.S. policing.

Also supportive of passive representation, participants believed their group affiliation alone could have adverse effects in their police work, especially when interacting with members of other social groups. Minority participants anticipated facing discrimination and racism from white citizens, particularly if they were assigned to work in majority white neighborhoods. The numerous statements from Hispanic, black, and Middle Eastern participants regarding 'not fitting in,' being 'judged,' being perceived as 'inferior,' or being 'the enemy' speak to the deep rooted concerns about encountering racism on the job. Conversely, numerous white participants were concerned about the opposite –being perceived as racist, or being caught up in a controversial use of force encounter with a minority citizen. One white male participant even reported that this possibility 'frightened' him, which speaks to how officers especially in the post-Ferguson era may be more fearful of the consequences of use of force against minority citizens (Fryer, 2016; James, James, & Vila, 2016).

On the other hand, participants also demonstrated support for active representation, which occurs when minority agents use their status to advocate for the groups they represent. Hispanic participants believed their ability to speak Spanish could assist them in handling disputes when a language barrier often prevented officers from understanding the root of a problem. This was especially important when assisting illegal immigrants who often fear engaging with law enforcement because they believe it may result in them being imprisoned or deported. Participants also believed that knowledge of a person's background and cultural practices could assist them in finding better and more peaceful solutions to problems.

Despite a body of literature that suggests an officer's demographics can affect behaviors, participants were adamant that their own race or ethnicity would not influence how they performed on the job, how they treated citizens, or how they made decisions. Our finding is perhaps reflective of the sample demographic – college students who have not yet begun their careers as police officers. Past research on prospective officers has found individuals may wear 'rose-tinted glasses' prior to entering police work and experience a reality shock upon entering the academy (Van Maanen, 1973). Over time, their commitment and motivation decline as they are socialized to the realities of the job (Maanen, 1975). In other words, individuals have the best case scenario in mind when they enter a policing career – they believe that racial tensions in policing exist, but they are determined to fight these societal problems as best as they can. For agencies seeking to improve police-minority relations, these findings are optimistic. These prospective police officers are assumed to be the most book educated on the important role of race in policing and police-citizen interactions since they have reviewed empirical research on the topic in their criminal justice coursework. Yet, they are still determined to embark on this career in hope of making a positive difference.

Minority participants in particular did not want to be hired based on reduced standards. While reduced standards are sometimes recommended as a way to promote

representative hiring or admission practices (EEOC, 2016), the sample said this puts the officer at risk of being criticized by coworkers and generally not being accepted as a competent officer. This finding has significant negative implications regarding the retention of minority officers. If minority officers are subjected to ridicule and accusations of receiving a 'helping hand' in the hiring process, they may be less likely to be accepted by peers and consequently at higher risk for quitting. Therefore, while reduced standards may increase recruitment and hiring practices, they may have negative implications for turnover, which ultimately could undermine the original intention of the relaxed hiring practices.

## **Limitations and conclusions**

While a few studies have examined officer perceptions of race and racial diversity, few studies have examined perceptions of prospective officers, and in particular those educated in criminal justice at the college level (see Todak, 2017 for an exception). These individuals represent the future generation of law enforcement, and their perceptions are directly relevant for understanding the topic of police diversity moving forward. Moreover, while previous studies have exclusively studied individuals who already made the decision to become police officers (Raganella & White, 2004; White et al., 2010), this sample includes individuals who are still making the decision. Despite this study strength, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited in that data stems from a single university and two thirds of the sample is female, while the majority of U.S. police patrol forces are male. Second, it is possible that many of these individuals will not move on to become police officers, though their attitudes are still representative of those of prospective officers. Third, although our sample had racial and ethnic diversity, the majority of minority participants were Hispanic, reflective of the city and university from which the study was sampled. Thus, we caution generalizability of these findings to all minority prospective police officers – the largest proportion of whom are black. However, we argue that this limitation of our sample is also a strength. Most of the research to date focuses on the black vs. white distinction, and scholars have long recognized that we do not know enough about the dynamics between Hispanics and the police. Furthermore, Hispanics outnumber blacks in the U.S., and have a large number of first and second generation residents, which is a critically important diversity component to consider. Thus, we argue that our study provides building blocks to address the perspectives of this under-studied population. The extensive and open-ended questionnaire, which investigated deeply into participants' motivations for becoming a police officer, methods of preparation for the job, and anticipations about police work, further allowed for an extensive exploration into the perceptions of this understudied population. Future research studies should focus specifically on Hispanic police officers and other racial minority groups, including Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native Americans who are slowly joining the police ranks.

Our study sheds light on a critically important social issue of police diversity and its impact on police-community relations. We especially highlight perceptions of



prospective Hispanic police officers, an understudied population. We found that prospective police officers strongly believed race features prominently in policing today and largely impacts the interactions between police and citizens. Participants displayed support for the ideals of passive representation – that minority police officers can have a positive impact on social problems and improve police-community relations because they share a similar background with minority community members. They also showed a belief in active representation, wherein they use their minority status to help citizens that often feel alienated from police. Notably, Hispanic participants felt they could improve relationships between police, Hispanic communities, and immigrants through shared language, mutual understandings, and trust.

On one hand, these findings are troubling as they demonstrate prospective officers are primed for the effects of race and racism even before applying to become police officers. This could result in a self-fulfilling prophecy if officers expect to face hostility from members of other social groups and respond in kind. In this way, police diversification could result in adverse consequences, such as if minority police officers feel ostracized in predominantly white neighborhoods. Recruits in the academy should be comprehensively trained in communications, cultural awareness, and verbal de-escalation to offset the likelihood that interactions with members of other social groups will become confrontational. On the other hand, the findings are optimistic in that prospective officers are aware of the persisting racial tensions in policing today and are specifically motivated to become police officers in order to make changes and improve police-community relationships. Minority participants in particular aspired to bridge the gaps between police and alienated communities. Police agencies should engage new, motivated officers in community policing programs if they are specifically interested in engaging minority and immigrant communities and connecting them with police services. College educated officers who have spent several years studying these issues may devise nuanced program and ideas for building these relationships. In general, researchers should continue to investigate the perceptions of prospective officers and evaluate how these change over time as individuals enter the police force and are socialized into the police culture. Future research should also continue to study the impact of diversification and officer/citizen demographic makeup on police-citizen interactions and relationships.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## **Appendix 1. Interview protocol**

### ***Personal background***

- (1) What year were you born?
- (2) What is your race/ethnicity?
- (3) What city do you consider home? (what state/country is that?)
- (4) What year are you in school?
- (5) Do you have any other degrees or certificates? (what was the degree in?)
- (6) Are you a part time or full time student?
- (7) Are you married? How long?
- (8) Do you have children? How many? What ages?
- (9) Are you currently employed? circle one: (Not Working) (Full Time) (Part Time)
- (10) (If yes to 10) Tell me about your job
- (11) Do you have any military experience?

### ***Prior exposure/ motivations for becoming a PO***

- (12) Tell me about your decision to be a police officer. (How old were you when this happened?)
- (13) Tell me about other people you know in law enforcement (Who? What type of work did they do, what department, rank? Anybody else?)
- (14) Did any of these relationships affect your decision to become a PO? (How?)  
Did any of these relationships

cause you to think twice about entering a career in policing?

(15) Have you had any contact with police officers in an enforcement setting? Tell me about that.

(16) Have you had any contact with police officers in a social setting? Tell me about that.

(17) Tell me about anything else that motivated you to want to be a PO?

(18) Tell me about your long term career goals

### ***Expectations about the job***

(1) Tell me about what you look forward to about being a PO? (Is there anything else?)

(2) As a police officer, tell me what you think your workday will be like.

(3) Tell me about any challenges you might face as a police officer. (Is there anything else?)

(4) Now I want you to tell me whether you think policing is different for a policeman and a policewoman.

- In terms of everyday police activities?
- In terms of how you will be treated by citizens?
- How you will be treated by your superiors?
- In terms of family and home life?

(5) Okay, we just discussed gender. Now I want to talk about how your race/ethnicity will influence your experiences.

- In terms of everyday police activities?
- In terms of how you will be treated by citizens?
- How you will be treated by your superiors?
- In terms of family and home life?

(6) Do you think policing will change you? In what ways?

(7) What have you learned in college that will help you as a police officer? (Will your criminal justice degree help

you in police work? In general, do you think it helps to have a degree?)

(8) Now I want to talk about your experiences with firearms:

- Have you ever fired a gun? (When was the first time? In what capacity?)
- Were there guns in your home growing up?
- Have you ever owned a gun? At what age did you first own a gun?
- How frequently would you say you shoot a firearm in your everyday life?

(9) Tell me how you would feel if you had to use your gun on the job.

(10) Tell me what you know about TASERS. (Where did you get this information?)

(11) Tell me how you would feel if you had to use your TASER on the job.

(12) Other than what we've talked about today, is there anything else you're looking forward to on the job?

(13) Is there anything else you are not looking forward to?