Toward the Development of a Roles Framework for Police Psychology

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The past two decades have seen major transformations in the way police departments conduct business. These transformations have impacted all aspects of policing from evidence collection to how officers perform their duties while on patrol. One aspect of policing that is still in the throes of transformation is the role of the police psychologist. Police psychologists have moved from a beginning of counseling police officers involved in critical incidents (see Kurke & Scrivner, 1995) to a broad range of law enforcement related activities. The traditional aspects of their jobs such as providing assistance to crisis negotiation teams, conducting counseling sessions for officers, and developing and presenting in-service and cadet training are part of an ever-changing picture of the police psychologist. Today's police psychologists operate at all levels of police department. Some of the newer roles to emerge in recent years are organizational and management consulting, counseling crime victims, and coordinating community involvement. This paper provides a framework for looking at both new and old roles of police psychologist and to argue for an expanded and better defined role within the policing profession.

In August of 1966 Charles Whitman climbed to the top of the “Tower” on the campus of the University of Texas. He had a hunting rifle with him and proceeded to shoot and kill 18 people. His killing spree was finally ended through the combined efforts of the Austin Police Department, and the Travis and Williamson County Sheriff’s Departments. Their efforts resulted in the fatal shooting of the suspect by Houston McCoy and Ramiro Martinez. Herein lies the beginning of the field of police psychology.

On August 1, 1966, University of Texas student Charles Whitman, after killing his mother and then his wife, took the elevator to the deck near the top of the Main Building. Over the course of more than an hour, he shot to death sixteen people and wounded more than thirty others at random while holding hostage much of what was then the small city of Austin.

By 1:24 pm, Charles Whitman had been shooting from the deck for 96 minutes – until Austin policemen Houston McCoy and Ramiro Martinez cornered and killed him. Whitman had positioned himself to fend off an attack from the southwest corner of the deck, but McCoy and Martinez attacked from the northeast corner. A controversy continues today as to whether McCoy or Martinez actually killed Whitman. Today, Ramiro Martinez is the Justice of the Peace of
Precinct 2 of Comal County. He is a retired Texas Ranger. McCoy, on the other hand, was recently awarded a monthly stipend from the City of Austin because of the psychological harm he received from the shooting of Whitman. He divorced his wife soon after the shooting and has been unable to hold a job for longer than a couple of years at a time since then. For over thirty years he has experienced sleeplessness, bloody nightmares and other psychological ailments (Lavergne, 1997).

From the point of view of the police psychologist, the most important aspect of the Whitman shootings was the difference in the futures of Martinez and McCoy. Soon after the events of August 1st, both Martinez and McCoy began to experience the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Martinez eventually sought out the counseling services of a licensed psychologist, while McCoy decided to "tough it out." Though psychologist had already had some limited involvement with different police departments across the country, many consider this to be the real emergence of police psychology as a distinct and much needed area of psychology.

METHOD

Approximately three times a year police psychologists from around the country meet at conferences to share ideas and discuss common issues. One of these conferences is the annual meeting of the Society for Police and Criminal Psychology (SPCP). The SPCP tends to have single-session meetings (no concurrent sessions) that are ideal for conducting brief workshops and data collection efforts. The participants in the SPCP conference tend to be psychologists who work for law enforcement agencies, psychologists contracted by law enforcement agencies to provide psychological services, or faculty members of academic departments (usually psychology, sociology or criminal justice) that have an interest in issues associated with police psychology. There are also some students from similar programs in attendance.

During the 1999 meeting of the SPCP a problem solving workshop was conducted (Dietz, 1999). During the workshop participants were asked to respond to the question, "What are the three most important things you do as a psychologist working with law enforcement?" The participants recorded their responses on a piece of paper and were then asked to share those responses. The workshop facilitator asked each participant to give one of their responses beginning with those participants on the front row. This is a modified use of the appreciative inquiry form of qualitative data collection. There were approximately 35 participants and after two rounds of participant responses it was clear that the facilitators had captured as many individual responses as the participants were ready or able to share.

The data, originally collected on flip charts, was then transcribed and sorted into categories. The data sorting processes were conducted three different times – by the facilitator, by two graduate students, and by the facilitator and the graduate students together. The final sorting seemed to produce the cleanest groupings of the categories and seemed to account for the anomalies produced during the first two sortings.