THE SOCIOPATHIC POLICE PERSONALITY: IS IT A PRODUCT OF THE “ROTTEN APPLE” OR THE “ROTTEN BARREL?”

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The “Rotten Apple” theory states that deviant police officers are those who psychological testing fails to screen out. This concept is favored by police administrators because it offers a quick and easy solution to police deviant behavior. However, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that it is the stressful occupation that is policing that is the fertile soil from which police deviant behavior springs otherwise known as the “Rotten Barrel” theory. This article shall explore police deviant behavior from the perspective that it is the “Rotten Barrel” that leads to police deviant behavior.

Incidents involving police use of excessive force are witnessed across the country nearly every day, and seem to be unending. The roll call of such inhumanity include the following:

1) The beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles,
2) The killing of Freddie Vela, a Detroit youth shot while riding his bike by an intoxicated police officer that had been involved in a one-car traffic accident,
3) Malice Green, beaten to death by Detroit police officers who were later convicted of his murder,
4) Jose Liralde, an unarmed homeless man shot several times by Detroit police officers,
5) Richard Tromer, who died from a severe beating and strangulation in July 1994 while in protective custody by Detroit Police,
6) Jorge Guillen, a Latino under treatment for schizophrenia allegedly beaten by Chicago, police. He died from asphyxiation, left for dead in his own blood,
7) Abner Louima of New York City, who suffered unspeakable horrors at the hands of New York City police officers,
8) Franklyn Reed, a Black male 27, who was shot in the back by a Litchfield, Conn. police officer while on his knees and hands raised in January, 1999
9) and last, but certainly not least, Amadou Diallo, a Black immigrant from Guinea, who was unarmed but nevertheless died in a hail of 41 shots by New York police officers who had mistaken him for a rape suspect in February, 1999 just to name a few.
Unfortunately, police use of excessive force and involvement in other deviant behavior is not just a contemporary problem, and it does not appear to have a simple solution. The question here is the problem due to a few "rotten apples" in policing, or are these acts of deviance a result of the "rotten barrel?" That is to say, is it that psychological testing is incapable of weeding out unsuitable applicants as many have claimed (Neal, 1986; Shaw, 1986; Blum, 1964), or is it as others have claimed in that the working environment of policing promotes this brand of deviance (Van Laere & Geerts, 1984; Slovak, 1983; Barker, 1978; Barker, 1976; Barker & Roebuck, 1973; Kuykendall, 1971). The focus of this analysis will be on the sociopathic, or antisocial, personality manifest in many police officers. Attention will be given to environmental stresses which increase the likelihood of criminal behavior within police departments and the influence of the police subculture on new recruits.

THE SOCIOPATHIC PERSONALITY

The term sociopath was introduced in 1930 to describe individuals who had a "disposition to violate social norms of behavior" (Lykken, 1996, p. 29). In 1994 the American Psychiatric Association provided a more detailed definition in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Mental Disorders (DSM-IV). The DSM-IV states that "there is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since the age 15 years" (Schneiderman, 1996, p. 54) and can be identified through a combination of three or more of the following:

1) failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest
2) deceitfulness, as indicated by repeatedly lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure
3) impulsivity or failure to plan ahead
4) irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by physical fights or assaults
5) reckless disregard for safety of self or others
6) consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial situations
7) lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another (p. 54).

Two types of sociopaths have been identified, primary and secondary sociopaths. Primary sociopaths are individuals who are thought to be predisposed to antisocial behavior through their genotype. This means that they are born with a predisposition towards this behavior. Secondary sociopaths refer to those who become antisocial because of environmental factors (Mealey, 1995). External factors such as police subcultural norms, peer influence, and economic factors may lead some officers to believe that antisocial or deviant behavior is the most appropriate and most beneficial approach to their role as a police officer. The environment in which police officers work offers unlimited opportunities for corruption and deceit, and these environmental factors may lead to sociopathic behavior. With little or no supervision on the streets, each officer must