

Blackberry in a Field of Blue: I See You

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Abstract: Self-reflections are educational, therapeutic, and introspective of one's place in the world. They allow navigation of personal identity. Self-narratives are more than individual stories or personal reconstructions of self-history. They illustrate how personal performances are understood by the author and their audiences—they have broader meaning. Instead of sanitized research devoid of feeling, self-reflection allows for emotional investment-based exploration. “Blackberry in a Field of Blue: I See You” is a self-reflection on my career as a Black cop, the ups and downs that come with policing from the perspective of a Black cop, and the performances of identity within a police subculture. It challenges the lack of representation of police culture through a racial lens and is about the relevance of lessons learned meant to inspire others to tell their stories.

Keywords: self-reflection, culture, policing, race

Despite Hollywood glamorizing policing through action movies and dramas, most police work does not involve high-speed chases, officer-involved shootings, manhunts, or intense investigations. Daily policing concerns the delivery of social services. We recognize this and know policing should be a helping profession. It is why we cringe or become outraged when police officers abuse their power. Yet this violation of public trust repeatedly happens as if caught in some surreal unending loop. We explain abhorrent police behavior as a few bad apples or condemn the system for systematic failures. Regardless of which justification, we cannot become desensitized because we deserve better. Our experience does not have to be the experience of others.

Policing changes a person (Van Maanen, 2010). Change occurs from the interaction of personal, organizational, and societal expectations. Aligned, these elements act as stabilizers, but competing interests create stress (Saunders et al., 2019). Culture is crucial in how people and groups accept or reject people, practices, and behaviors (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Debates occur on what constitutes police culture, how it manifests, and how it influences individual change (Paoline & Gau, 2018). Police are often treated as homogenous, and scholars explain how police become disenchanted with the public, police administrators, or the justice system (Saunders et al., 2019). Less explored is the experience of Black cops, how police culture impacts their lives, and how they represent a policing subculture (Keyes, 2014). When Black cops are studied, such inquiry is often related to organizational phenomena such as numerical demographics, promotion, discipline, or arrest activity (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017). These attempts to understand Black cops in social systems neglect individual reflection entirely or limit that inquiry.

Who is the Black cop? Definitions vary by relationship and expectations. The Black cop is a nuisance, token, or an extinguisher used to suppress the smoldering embers of racial discord. The Black cop is a potential ally, enemy, tool of the system, or chameleon. The Black cop is privileged and penalized. I have worked for over two decades in policing. The journey has left me reflective, embattled, and a bit jaded. From day one, the Black cop has something to prove.

People want to know the Black cop has their back. Suspicious peers are waiting for the “aha” moment when the Black cop shows some compassion or Black solidarity so they can label the Black cop an anti-police radical. There is also the expectation that Black cops will not show too much professional ambition. Community members take the Black cop to task for suggesting that the system be allowed to work despite its less-than-stellar track record. Yet, the Black cop does this while also questioning the system.

Black cops have general police concerns but are burdened internally and externally by racialized practices (Keyes, 2014). I write this hoping that Black cops facing adversity because of their position, decisions, or the events they bear witness to do not choose to self-isolate from their profession and communities. A retreat is a natural reaction with short-term benefits but long-term costs. The excitement, sense of purpose, and desire to change the world are distant memories now. I have reached the zenith and valley in my profession, but my experience continuously informs my perception. Once engaged, I am navigating what policing means. Over the years, I have questioned why I chose policing and, more importantly, why I stayed. This journey involves expression through writing, a form of catharsis. It is an inward and outward look at Blacks who choose to wear the badge and how they lose, retain, or renegotiate their identity.

Background and Motivation

My mother’s high school yearbook listed her professional goal as “detective.” This may seem strange for a Black woman raised in the Jim Crow South. I do not know if she meant private or police detective and I regret not asking her. Did she read novels, watch television, and imagine being a detective was glamorous, as portrayed in fictional accounts? She never accomplished that goal. She hoped her six children would realize theirs. She was proud I became a police officer but died before I was promoted to detective. Throughout the years, my motivation to continue advancing was self-betterment, but also to be someone my mother would be proud to call her son.

My story is not unique. Most Black cops I meet desire to honor their families, improve their lives, and serve their communities. We are not a monolith. We run the gamut of typologies and reflect society. Petty jealousies and ambitions drive a few. Some are sanctimonious and laud our positions feeling that we are somehow above our brothers and sisters. Others approach the job with a faithful servant’s heart. This is true of any ethnic group in any occupation. However, Black cops are separated from other ethnicities and other cops by the historical legacy of racism within American policing (Keyes, 2014). Racism and racial resentment are still found in police organizations (LeCount, 2017). Blacks who choose a career in policing face personal, internal, and external challenges (Keyes, 2014).

About 20 years ago, I visited the first Black captain in my police department. His office was filled with community service awards, police memorabilia, degrees, and other knickknacks expected in a police administrator’s office. Something I did not expect caught my eye. It was a family photo labeled “Blackberries.” Nothing is strange about family photos, but the caption caught my attention. It acknowledged personal heritage and history. When I asked about the

frame, he said, “You must stay grounded in who you are.” He told me not to let the system change me and that even as a Black administrator, he faced racism daily. This Black veteran cop told me to retain my self against the dominant narrative that change is inevitable. My reminiscence on the Blackberry photograph inspired this article title. The seemingly unending police conflict with Black people and my recent reading of Dacia Price’s (2021) work along with a recent State Supreme Court decision in which I was involved encouraged me to write about my police experience (*City of Fort Worth [CoFW] v. Pridgen, 2022*).

No matter our ideology, and despite tenure, rank, or service, as long as Black cops carry the badge, we operate in a probationary status of sorts. Whether we believe it or not. Conti and Doreian (2014) explain Black police employment is more a necessity and less about acceptance. Dominant police culture will remain suspicious of Black cops because of race, and segments of the Black community will continue to distrust Black cops because of their occupation (Keyes, 2014). Nearly 50 years ago, James Baldwin (2011) opined:

Blacks know something about black cops. They know that their presence on the force doesn’t change the force or the judges or the lawyers or the bondsmen or the jails. They know how much the black cop has to prove, and how limited are his means of proving it: where I grew up, black cops were yet more terrifying than white ones. (p. 63)

Black cops experience Baldwin’s meaning at some point. The irony is that Black cops’ experiences are rarely explored. “Blackberry in a Field of Blue: I See You” recognizes that no matter how we try to blend, we cannot hide. We represent Blackberries immersed in fields of Blue.

Method

Self-reflection bridges individuals and society (Wall, 2008). It explains how culture impacts the individual and by extension, the community. More than recollection, self-analysis involves self-therapy (Toyosaki et al., 2009). Custer (2014) calls it a “transformative research method because it changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits” (p. 11). We learn through experiencing, witnessing, or being told. Self-narratives are educational. They give the reader a window into the narrator’s life. The narrator revisits past events by looking in the mirror at a new point in time.

Self-narratives are becoming common in analyzing environments (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Unlike other methods, which bracket or suppress the researcher’s experience, self-narrative focuses on experiences to construct knowledge (Wall, 2008). Sense of self is an orientation of who we think we are or who we think we want or should be (Cottle, 2002). This is not static and autoethnography represents a facet of ourselves. Such presentation is not one-dimensional and makes autoethnographies no less authentic, but deemphasizes other identity aspects. Van Maanen (2010) explains that we have multiple identities. Self-reflection is a compartmentalization of some identities that allows us to understand a set of experiences through specific identities.

Autoethnographies also critique master narratives. Often, the stories of non-White people are told through a Whiteness lens (Toyosaki et al., 2009). These stories occur through media reports, court rulings, political decisions, and personal narratives. Du Bois (1903) theorized Blacks internalized these accounts by seeing themselves through the eyes of others and experiencing “double-consciousness” (p. 8) by which they struggle to engage their Blackness and Americanness. Du Bois held this was true regardless of socioeconomic status or position. My experience indicates this is less pronounced when Black cops enter policing but magnified the longer they stay. It dovetails with research that demonstrates White police hold more racially charged views than White non-police (LeCount, 2017). My self-reflection is a narration of my experience. Rather than try to reproduce exact conversations lost to time, I use themes. I explain the broader police culture where Black cops exist, the navigation of that culture, and my experience.

Police Culture

Police culture is generally explored through organizational environments or officer typologies. The literature emphasizes culture by identifying officers’ attitudes about the public, supervision, rules, and policing (Saunders et al., 2019). Paoline (2004) groups police culture into Tough Cops, Clean Beat Crime Fighters, Avoiders, Problem Solvers, and Professionals. Each group’s characteristics are described briefly.

Paoline’s (2004) Tough Cops are cynical. They consider the public hostile and police supervisors obstructive. They exert social control through strict and selective enforcement against serious crimes. Paoline’s Clean Beat Crime Fighters are skeptical of the public. They are critical of supervisors they believe unsupportive. Unlike Tough Cops, they enforce all laws. They advocate individual rights but not group rights, which they view as entitlements. Paoline’s Avoiders are disconnected and apathetic. They do enough to get by and, if possible, less. They are burnouts with no strong views about policing but tend to be negative. Paoline’s Problem Solvers are community-oriented and place a premium on community relations. They enforce laws to reduce social harm, favor minimal supervision, and value discretion. Lastly, Paoline’s Professionals take a broad orientation toward policing and have favorable opinions of supervisors and the public. They believe policing should be balanced with innovation and reform (Cordner, 2017).

These categories are oversimplified, as overlap exists but facilitate group motivation. They are useful in explaining police interaction with colleagues and the public. Black cops are in each group but face unique challenges (Brunson & Gau, 2011). Although research is replete with different police cultural typologies, less common is the impact police culture has on police by race and how this impact creates more nuanced variations of police subculture. Some research has focused on the relationship between Black cops and Black citizens specifically (Brunson & Gau, 2011; Keyes, 2014).

Policing is conceptualized in color and often not within a direct racial context, although race is at the heart of policing (Owusu-Bempah, 2017). Bumper stickers advertising drivers “back the blue” are common, as are thin blue line emblems, depictions of the United States flag in blue

color schemes, and Blue Lives Matter decals. Countless academic literature and media coverage has given attention to being Black and Blue, Blacks behind the badge, race, policing, and so on (Keyes & Keyes, 2022; Wilkins & Williams, 2008). Black cops are never just cops or Blacks. They straddle worlds and develop coping strategies for engaging their institutions and communities.

With that in mind, in addition to Paoline's categories, I propose my own collection of Black cop subculture groups: True Believers, Radicals, and Appeasers. I conceptualized these categories through years of observation and conversations with Black cops.

True Believers are found in each of the five general categories. They hold no identifiable values beyond those found in mainstream policing culture. It is not that True Believers are racially unaware, but rather that they embrace policing without prioritizing race. The sole difference between traditional cultural attitudes and True Believers is the historical legacy of racial oppression in policing and the expectations placed on them by others. Radicals believe that policing as it exists should fundamentally be changed. They disagree with many internal policies and external practices because they are racially disparate. Radicals rarely reach executive levels and, if they do, seldom maintain their position. They work to change the culture and institution of policing. Appeasers are go-along to get-along types. They might believe policies and procedures racially harm them or others, but they remain silent for preservation or reward. They may also explicitly and selfishly support policies they otherwise deem harmful.

Indoctrination

Twenty-four years ago, I became a police officer. This was a childhood dream. Entering adulthood, I seldom entertained policing because of the racial conflicts that seemed to be never-ending. A serendipitous newspaper advertisement made me reconsider and give policing a chance. The department where I applied was one of the region's largest, a highly respected organization—as evidenced by police officers from other agencies seeking employment there. The pay was competitive, with ample opportunity for growth and specialized assignments. Considering its large size, the department prided itself on being relatively scandal-free.

After passing the entry exam, receiving my conditional employment offer, and completing my background check, I recall my first day at the academy. It was early 2000, and I was new to the state. I arrived early. Several recruits were talking in the recruit parking section of the academy. I scanned the group, searching for a Black person. I did not want to be the “only one.” At age 24, as a Marine veteran, I had experience in military units that were not diverse. I knew being the “only one” meant you were isolated or over-friended by well-intentioned but invasive inquiries about how you got there.

Police are generally White males, and deviations invite questions about how others enter policing (Bolton & Feagin, 2004). There was another Black recruit. He was also a Marine veteran, and before speaking, we exchanged the silent, “I see you” acknowledgment common among many African Americans who meet for the first time. It is often the briefest eye contact or slightest tilt of the head that says, “We are here.” It signals no privilege or nefariousness, only

a shared sense of self. It is the confirmation that we are not alone. I never developed a close relationship with my fellow recruit, who I call Blackberry Too. Still, his was the only house I visited, and we talked throughout the academy. Different paths led us to the same job. Blackberry Too was career-oriented with aspirations of promoting. I planned to stay a few years and return to my native state. Policing remained an option but not my only focus.

The academy is a preparatory environment where recruits learn about policing. It is highly controlled, where the staff educates and attempts to mold the recruit. The police department wants total commitment and scholars designate them as “greedy institutions” (Conti & Nolan, 2005, p. 166). In addition to physical and technical aspects of policing, the academy involves a cultural component. A common question recruits face is what type of officer they will be.

Police culture from the academy perspective is condensed into model officers, slugs, incompetents, and betrayers. Model officers are ideal. They are competent, courteous, and while not overly aggressive, ready to use necessary force. They are proud police representatives and work hard not to sully themselves or the profession. Slugs are avoiders who shirk their duties and when necessary, do the bare minimum. Incompetents struggle with performance and are a liability to the department based on their ineptness. They require disproportionate amounts of training or retraining. Betrayers are law violators who embarrass police but also include challengers of police culture. The model officer typology was reinforced throughout the academy. Work hard, be competent, and do not embarrass police.

During the academy, instructors made not-so-subtle references about policing the predominantly Black Eastside of town. Most war stories and police narratives were thinly disguised racial descriptions about specific communities. I was bothered and wondered how other Black police recruits exposed to these stories felt. Blackberry Too took it in stride but expressed he believed the officers embellished. When I questioned the hype about East, I would be told, “You will see.” I felt I was being scanned for potential betrayer characteristics that I have termed Radical. After six months, I was proud to graduate and felt a sense of accomplishment.

Field Training

Field training was everything I expected and more. It was exciting, new, and a job where my day was subject to change. Probationary officers were paired with three veteran officers in different patrol divisions on various shifts for about four months. Rookies are expected to apply what they learned in the academy, which is somewhat true. A bit more naïve than I care to admit, I did not consider how the academy narratives would be operationalized by different police personalities on the street. I learned. Being a rookie in its entirety is something I vaguely recall. Like boot camp, the overall experience is retained. A few specific incidents and lessons were seared in my mind to be recalled and analyzed later. Field training was the beginning of lessons that conceptualized how I came to view the Black cop subculture. I use three themes, which have reoccurred throughout my career.

Be Competent

My first field training officer (FTO) was a true professional and a middle-aged White male corporal nearing retirement. He was methodical, ethical, and patient. I learned the nuts and bolts of street policing from him. I believe it helped that I first trained in a predominantly White community. Middle-class Whites are less likely to tolerate their rights being routinely violated, and police officers are less likely to try it. Textbook-style policing was the order of the day. I was to return to this sector for my final “ghost” training phase. After learning I would be in training in East, he cautioned me: “They police differently in East. They shouldn’t, but they do. So don’t develop bad habits there.” I was struck by the contradiction presented by this FTO and many academy instructors. The idea that this White officer would advise me about policing a predominantly Black side of town where I lived fell on deaf ears. I was new to policing but had been Black my entire life and needed no advice on how to treat “my” people. Little did I know his cautions surrounded other officers.

Lay Low

My second FTO was a thirtyish Black officer with about ten years on the force. In hindsight, he was an Avoider/Appeaser. He was assigned to a mostly Black and Hispanic area. He was physically fit, with shined shoes and a crisp uniform, and his near-constant scowl convinced me I was about to endure a month of torment. I was right. We spent half the shift driving one strip of his beat, searching for warrants or stolen vehicles. It was like hiding in plain sight. We parked for the other half of the shift in low-income motels, using binoculars to run license plates for warrants or stolen cars. For a month, warrants and stolen vehicles were my life. He cherry-picked calls and avoided paperwork-heavy cases.

Cops have various interests, and some pursue different aspects of policing more vigorously such as traffic enforcement, finding weapons, or detecting wanted people. No value judgment can be placed on these preferences, but patrol officers are generalists and FTOs are responsible for exposing their trainees to a broad range of interactions. This FTO found easier calls while officers from different beats and districts handled challenging situations on ours. The message was clear. Get a simple call, write a few citations, maybe make an arrest, and ride calls to quitting time. Above all, don’t cause embarrassment, don’t create more work than necessary, and don’t attract the sergeant’s attention. Getting stuck on overtime was permissible on days when he had no plans or off-duty jobs, which was communicated at the beginning of the shift. His motto... “Pump your breaks, rookie. You want to last 25 years.”

Have My Back

My third FTO was a Tough Cop assigned to the notorious Eastside, where rookies salivated to cut their teeth. He was a quiet White unassuming police corporal nearing the halfway point in his career. He was not concerned with petty violations unless he thought they were disrespectful to the police. His mandate during our first encounter was that “We control the streets.” He had a distinct southern drawl and referred to me as only “sir” or “rookie.” He was hellbent on getting me in a fight. Before de-escalation was the rave or the issuance of Tasers, it was common for an

FTO to tacitly provoke a physical altercation to evaluate a rookie's willingness and ability to respond physically and support fellow officers. No stranger to confrontations, I assured him I could handle myself. Nonetheless, my first physical altercation resulted from his curiosity, not a necessity.

After responding to a domestic disturbance, we located the intoxicated aggressor eating in his backyard. The decision was made to arrest him for domestic violence. He asked to be allowed to finish eating, and my FTO responded by knocking food from his hand, stepping back, and saying, "Get him, rookie." Now enraged, any hope of a peaceable arrest was gone. The much-anticipated fight was no more than a short tussle to handcuff an off-balance, combative drunk. Later we engaged in more legitimate and physically challenging altercations involving far more aggressive people. But those seemed to matter less than the first encounter.

After being released to solo status, I was reassigned to my initial police division. Each shift had a corporal and sergeant assigned, but patrol provided unsupervised opportunities for cops to develop their policing style. There were not many Black residents where I initially worked, my colleagues on shift were White except for two Latinos and one Asian, and I felt we all worked hard to be model officers. By my revised standards, I was certainly a True Believer. Within two years I transferred to a more racially diverse district for a change of scenery and better days off. It is in there where I noticed greater tension between the police and minorities, mainly Black people.

I often got the impression I was supposed to pick a side, and this is how I became aware of expectations placed on Black cops. I watched mostly White police officers arrive on-scene in a bad mood frustrated they were dealing with something they considered a never-ending problem, even if this was their first encounter with a particular person. They would later vent, and my response was normally unsympathetic. This is the job we get paid to do. We are not in a competition or war with our public. The conversations normally ended with my being called naïve or told I did not get it. On other occasions, I was approached by a Black person wanting to have a side-bar conversation about the "racist" police despite that person being deserving of police attention through their actions. I would inform them despite what they believed about cops to consider how their behavior influenced or necessitated a police response. Again, I was told I did not get it.

Volatile situations involved condescending police who were rude *and* where there was a legitimate need for their presence, but a failure by the involved parties to recognize it. After four years, I decided it was time to move on. I enjoyed patrol but did not want to spend my entire career in a street-level tug-of-war. I knew advancing would have other challenges, but I was intentional about getting a different experience. I was promoted to corporal and trained some probationary officers before accepting a detective assignment.

General assignment detectives investigate mundane cases. I lost track of the hundreds of thefts, simple assaults, and burglaries, but will never forget one case. For a while, I was the only Black detective in my office. One of my fellow detectives was venting about an unreasonable citizen who threatened to call the city council about his inability to resolve her issue. He claimed she

had a history of getting cops in trouble for petty things. His case involved one of her neighbors and an ongoing property dispute. My sergeant and lieutenant told me they wanted me to speak to her with the assigned detective. I was encouraged to do most of the talking. I was a new detective and wondered how I might better resolve her issue until I realized she was Black. We made small talk and reached a resolution she accepted quickly. I kept asking myself what was so hard about finding some consensus.

My colleague and chain of command were happy because I had their back, but I had mixed feelings. I was glad to help but had been used as a token and wondered if this was the norm. I did not realize it, but this was to be an occupational trend—and this is where I began my transformation into my third Black police subculture, what I term a Radical.

Black cops are torn between being bridges to the Black community and having others be accountable for building and mending relationships. I have observed subtler and more awkward deployments of Black cops to allay much greater crises than property damage. Some have been successful, while others have been recognized as ploys and have backfired. When fallout occurs, the Black cop is left front and center and most likely feeling like a failure, tool, or both, which leads to the rhetorical question: Who has the Black cop's back?

Blueberries in Black Fields

Detective work is case management—almost entirely reactive—and I missed the streets so I transferred to a divisional tactical unit on the Eastside. Initially, it was a great experience. I was the assistant team leader of the most productive crime response team in the busiest division. We executed more narcotic search warrants than I can remember. It did not take long for my enthusiasm to dampen. I did not mind the technical execution of the warrants, but the casual disdain shown for many of the residents, nearly all of whom were Black, bothered me.

We overpoliced with a passion. Unlike patrol assigned to a policing district, we roamed the entire division. We did not dress like patrol, and our black tactical gear was meant to be intimidating and set us apart. I felt like part of an occupying army. We were either knocking down doors or conducting zero-tolerance by stopping everything that moved. People who were not criminals would tense up when we arrived on the scene. We were so aggressive that even district patrol supervisors cautioned their officers about assisting us. It was common to see a wolfpack of four or more of our police cars during a traffic stop. My team members expressed glee with this style of policing.

On a 14-member team, three were Black and one Latino. None shared my concerns. During my time in this unit, my first sergeant was an avoider. He did not want to hear anything I thought about our policing style. His replacement was a Clean Beat Crime Fighter concerned with arrest and warrant stats. He informed me numbers kept him and the bosses satisfied. He suggested if I were unhappy, I should talk to the lieutenant. I did one better and spoke to the lieutenant and captain. He was right. Neither cared to hear my concerns because the sergeant produced numbers. Until I was promoted out of the unit, I worked with Paoline's (2004) Tough Cops and Clean Beat Crime Fighters as well as True Believers and Appeasers.

Be Competent Revisited

A legendary story exists of a police supervisor who could not pronounce many words. At a roll-call briefing, he allegedly read about a dangerous ride and mispronounced the word tarantula as “tarantoola.” I have heard this story many times and do not doubt its authenticity or the supervisor’s identity. Black officers repeat it with the supervisor’s name and rank. I have heard the story told by White officers, and it includes a different Black supervisor of different ranks nearly every time. Race is not the focus when told by Black officers, only that the supervisor was college-educated. Education is not a factor when told by White officers, and I always got the impression there was a slight nod to race. The incident happened before I was hired, yet it survives to be retold. I wonder at some point if my name might be inserted in the narrative.

I came to policing with a general education diploma (GED) from Job Corps and an honorable Marine Corps discharge. Neither was enough to take me where I wanted. As a Blackberry, I have felt the GED was magnified and highlighted. I have heard numerous GED jokes that could torpedo perceptions of my competence. Good leaders seek self-improvement and want to inspire confidence, so I set out to improve myself. I enrolled in college as a detective. After four years, I obtained a bachelor’s degree, and two years after promoting to sergeant, a master’s degree. Despite scholastic accomplishments, I learned quickly that Black cops face certain stigmas, i.e., the enduring legacy of the “tarantoola” being used to discredit them.

If competence were the qualification metric, I would excel. I consistently scored very high on every promotional exam without exception. On each subsequent test, I scored higher. Each promotional candidate has access to identical study material and tests. However, there were always rumors that minorities were given access to study the test beforehand. These rumors surfaced after one or more minorities scored particularly well on an exam.

I mastered the technical aspects of policing by painstakingly memorizing policies, procedures, and statutes. I earned multiple graduate degrees, including a doctorate. Beyond these things, I excelled at my job and treated my troops and the public respectfully and compassionately. If this sounds narcissistic, it must be taken in context. From my experience, the perception is that Black mediocrity equals White incompetence and Black excellence equals White competency. When a White officer scores well on a highly competitive promotional examination, that officer is “sharp.” When a Black officer does as well or better, and the untrue, unfair advantage is not listed, s/he is labeled a “test taker.” So, you’re a competent Black cop? So what? Blackberries have two more Blueberry boxes to check.

Lay Low Revisited

Laying low is practiced by the variant police cultures and perfected by the avoiders (Paoline, 2004). I have constantly challenged the status quo. I was perhaps the first officer to wear braids on uniform patrol. Officers assigned to undercover assignments often wear braids, but I did so on patrol. I read the policy manual, and the only reference was that hair must remain off the collar and not be eccentric or unnaturally colored. Check.

The reaction from my colleagues was mixed. Older White veteran officers tended to stare but otherwise ignored me. Black veteran officers were more interested. I was usually the subject of some proposed intervention, which never worked. One Black, nearly 30-year veteran, commented, “You didn’t come here with that” about my hair. Another said, “It is hard enough for us already; you don’t need to bring attention to yourself.” In short, don’t make us look bad. Over the years, I have worn a variety of hairstyles. When I reached an executive rank, I pushed to change the hair policy, to make it more straightforward and less discriminatory. Some people were upset because I was messing with the culture and paramilitary look. So much for laying low.

Backup Revisited

Backup is an essential component of effective policing and can be expected when engaged in lawful, professional policing. Backup does not extend to excessive force, disrespect, racial profiling, criminal acts, or disparate employment practices. As a patrol supervisor, I always had my team’s back when they delivered professional police service, which was most often the case. Exceptions rarely occurred because clear parameters and expectations were established. If people needed to go to jail, they went. I never allowed force to be used as punishment, and I would never have the back of any officer who did. Moving up the ranks, “having my back” evolved. It meant not pushing for a new rule or policy because it might upset police officers or the association even though it was needed for accountability. It meant maintaining police solidarity, not expressing Black solidarity whatsoever, and never breaking ranks, even when everyone generally knew we were wrong. In areas of controversy and dilemma, I have found it is better to have a spine than have someone’s back who is undeserving of that support.

Theme Convergence

After 15 years, I was promoted to captain and later received an appointment above that rank. The themes were now magnified more than ever. People would tell me the rumors of how I was only promoted because I was young and Black and the chief at the time was also Black. I was not bothered. This was familiar territory. What bothered me was the stagnation and disparate treatment that permeated the organization. I found that occupying an executive position was not what I had hoped. Some peers, subordinates, and superiors worked hard to maintain the status quo. I was frustrated and, on days, regretted taking the appointment.

Within 18 months, I was unceremoniously demoted. A White officer made national news after being captured on camera using excessive force and disrespecting a Black person who had called for police assistance. I and my supervisor, who was also Black, recommended the officer be terminated. This recommendation was rejected and shortly after we became the targets of a nonsensical investigation which alleged we violated policy and we were subsequently returned to our civil service ranks of captain (*CoFW v. Pridgen*, 2022).

Taking a stance as a Black cop when a Black person is involved most certainly invites criticism when that stance favors the Black person, no matter the rightness of the action. The demotion did not bother me as much as the misinformation campaign the department orchestrated to

deflect attention away from another racially charged police incident. Externally, the public was told my supervisor and I were being unappointed for policy violations. Internally, the message was that our ability to do our jobs effectively was compromised. Or to put it more bluntly, we were untrustworthy Radicals. The irony was not lost on me that before the accusations, in addition to our normal duties, we were both asked and directed repeatedly to be ambassadors to the Black community to build relationships often within the purview of other executives.

Rather than shy away from the conflict and the demotion, I leaned into it and gave public statements. My loyalty was fully intact. But to the idea of what policing should be. “What is deviant organizationally may be occupationally correct (and vice-versa)” (Van Maanen, 2010, p. 8). I also did not want to feel a sense of self-betrayal or betray the public for taking the path of least resistance. Despite the public spectacle that followed, I never regretted my decision to fight back or file legal action. Eight years later, the lawsuit has ended, and the Texas Supreme Court sided with the city (*CoFW v. Pridgen*, 2022). I was not surprised, as racialized institutions have a history of protecting racialized institutions (Ray, 2019). I have also long understood the privileges and penalties of being a Black cop.

On Privilege and Penalty

Privilege takes many forms, and one advantage is that the privileged can ignore their benefits (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013). Privilege is not limited to race, sex, or sexual orientation but extends to occupation. Policing must be representative, but this job is owed to no one. It remains a privilege, never a right. Despite some marginalization and internal discrimination, Black cops are undoubtedly privileged. Two salient examples come to mind.

As a rookie with a newborn at home, I stopped at a department store to purchase some diapers after work. The store was in the predominantly Black Eastside, and I was in full police uniform. The diapers were bulky and would not fit in a bag. While exiting the store, an off-duty White officer with a different agency approached me and asked if he could see my receipt. I heard a customer say, “He’s stopping the police.” Embarrassed and angered, I told him no and continued to walk out. He followed me outside and said it was policy to check receipts for unbagged large items. Onlookers were curiously watching to see what would happen.

I explained that he was beholden to enforcing state law, not store policy and that his job was keeping the peace and preventing the consequences of theft, not harassing people. Many police agencies, including his, prohibit officers from enforcing “house rules” such as checking receipts. Unless an officer has reasonable suspicion to believe a crime has been or is about to be committed, they have no legal grounds for action. I watched this officer watch me check out with the clerk. I asked him if he was trying to detain me or wanted to request an on-duty police response. He said no, but continued to follow me to my car, where I got in and drove off.

Had I not been in uniform, had he been a regular store employee, or if no witnesses were present, I do not know what the outcome would have been. I look back and see that it could have escalated. Despite wanting no special privilege as a police officer, I was angered and insulted. I felt he would not have questioned me if I had not been Black, which made me think of how he

regularly treated Black people. I knew I would probably face greater scrutiny and criticism than him if the incident came to light. My department has a policy of not shopping or going directly to and from home in uniform. This reminded me of my conversations with Black people asking them to consider their behavior as contributing factors. It was a look-in-the-mirror moment. I did not expect my agency to have my back, so I laid low and let it go. Still, the uniform gave me a bit of privilege I know is not enjoyed by other Blacks.

Years later, while on patrol, a citizen called to report a suspicious-looking Black sitting in the driver's seat of a police car. He alleged he believed the car was stolen and was checking to see if any police vehicles were missing. Realizing this complaint was about me, I responded. I rang the doorbell, knocked, and called the number provided. I received no response and left his house with a sense of satisfaction and irritation. I knew if I were White the call would not have been made. Scores of frivolous complaints are made against Black people. I have responded to some and stopped others from being dispatched. They range from Black men playing with their children at parks to Blacks walking through neighborhoods. Although limited, the Black cop is better positioned and better protected than the average Black person.

Being professional does not mean Black cops should ignore racial discrimination or marginalization. To do so invites the cultural penalty Baldwin (2011) mentions and amounts to being a tool or worse. Significant harm attaches to the lost opportunity for the community and police department. Some Black cops do not care how they are viewed. They consider cultural challenges as the meaningless rants of criminals or anti-police radicals. They may be correct in some cases but there is usually a note of truth if they listen closely. Other Black cops feel betrayed when culturally attacked and feel their work is unappreciated. They may withdraw or rationalize why some Blacks face discrimination.

On occasion, I have found myself in both camps. I have questioned if there is not something inherently wrong with the Black cop. I have witnessed and experienced internal and external discrimination. And yet I stay. What kind of person does this make me? Do I believe Blackberries will ever be firmly planted in policing enough to change the culture? Am I overly invested and afraid to walk away because, at this point, it is sunk cost fallacy, or am I simply refusing to accept things as they are? I tell myself the same thing I tell outsiders. I don't know.

Discussion

My experience and lessons are almost certainly universal but are problematic in the context of policing. Culture is not only what we learn. It is how we learn and autoethnography permits new ways of viewing culture. People often wonder how police can stand by and watch their peers behave disrespectfully or aggressively and not act. We saw it in the Rodney King beating in 1991, and we saw it again in the 2020 murder of George Floyd (Keyes & Keyes, 2023). It is easy and perhaps convenient to paint all police with a broad brush. This, however, fails to explain the complexity of police culture(s). I admit failure to act signals at best moral cowardice and at worst agreement. I also recognize neither occurs in the moment. Police officers negotiate and navigate their identity from hiring until they leave the job. Racialized attitudes and biased policing are certainly factors in how policing is performed, but police socialization is not the

homogenizing process it is sometimes presented as. There is a struggle to retain or even obtain a sense of identity performed in a thousand small encounters before a cellphone is ever set to record. My experience tells me that officers who maintain their moral compass have prevented even more police tragedies from occurring. My expression has been from the perspective of a Black cop—a double-edged experience. Wanting to believe in the system and trusting it are not the same.

Conclusion

I was forewarned I would change. I heard it in the academy, and I heard it afterward. I was never told what that change meant. I entered the field with thoughts of being a Professional, as identified in scholarly discourse (Paoline, 2004). Some would say I am a Radical within my definition, while others would label me as an Avoider. One thing is certain. I never have and never intend to be an Appeaser. Policing has been costly, and I have found it and myself lacking at times. It also has had many positive highlights. I have been allowed to provide a more comfortable life for my family than I would have possibly enjoyed otherwise. I have met some of the best people the job has to offer. I have helped and influenced people individually. This has been most rewarding. Despite where I end up, policing should be a helping profession. My experience has not been for nothing despite my misgivings. My loved ones have always been supportive of my occupational choice. My mother most certainly was. I entered this field as a Blackberry but will leave with undeniable shades (some might argue stains) of blue.

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