Improving community outcomes and social equity through leveraged police leadership – A chapter review

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INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to have been invited to write a chapter review for "Improving Community Outcomes and Social Equity Through Leveraged Police Leadership" (Taylor et al., 2022). This chapter was written by four police practice experts from the Canadian community safety and well-being context and outlines a police leadership imperative that they propose will move policing beyond law enforcement to become a key influencer of public health outcomes. They call to action a "new mission" for police leadership and do not shy away from acknowledging the tense and precarious social context of policing in our current era.

Before digging into this chapter, I am compelled to declare the lens that I bring to this review. As a 23-year public servant working in social programs and social policy, a social sciences doctoral candidate, and a community practitioner, it is safe to say that I am not an expert in police leadership. I have spent much of my career working and leading alongside many human services, including police, to achieve community-level outcomes. On this journey, I have witnessed police leadership that inspires change, collaboration, and collective action and police management that is closed, non-collaborative, non-trusting, and rigid. I have also observed the impact of the role of this key community player on the community and social ecosystem. This outsider and partner lens is supplemented by critical and complexity theory assumptions. I have chosen these two paradigms as they reveal my assumptions about society: that certain groups are privileged in society over others (critical theory) (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994) and that societies function as dynamic complex systems that cannot

be understood through the actions of any single agent, but rather insights emerge through better understanding of the combined activity of all involved (Lichtenstein, 2015). I declare this framing and associated assumptions to support the integrity of this review and also to illustrate that the authors who invited me to conduct this review are indeed living the challenge they present in this chapter—to create space for divergent and diverse perspectives to tackle the social and community challenges that we must face together. In the following pages, I humbly share the insights that I have gleaned from this chapter and offer some reflections.

This chapter on police leadership contained many features that I would hope to see covered in the description of a new policing mission to transition from a crime-fighting, law-enforcement focus to a committed, much needed leadership role in the achievement of improved public health. The authors outline the importance of authentic leadership, the requirement to think and work in multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary ways, the role of innovation, failure, and learning and the police leader's role in creating open organizational learning systems that ensure the conditions for all these preceding characteristics.

The authors begin this work by shining a light on the police norms of the past. They describe the traditional, rigid nature of police leadership, based on "top-down hierarchical management structures supported by command-and-control systems, policies, and procedures" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 88). Among other characteristics, this legacy leadership approach promoted risk aversion, discouraged innovation and creativity, encouraged a common worldview, discouraged diverse thinking, valued action over reflection, censured internal critics, and prized loyalty over all else. It is the position of the authors that, while many police organizations are 40 years into a "community policing" focus, the traditional leadership styles and subsequent organizational cultures do not generate the collective community outcomes that will make our communities safer and healthier. The authors propose that the police leadership of the future must be dramatically different (in fact, almost the opposite) from what it was. This call to action is supported through the authors' own personal police leadership

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perspectives and through outlining police leadership examples from Scotland, the United States and Canada.

While this chapter offers many insights, the authors bundle the requisite police leadership characteristics into the following three dimensions:

- Leaders with the courage and passion to expand the mission
- Leaders able to shift their focus from positional power to multi-sector influence
- Leaders who develop, serve, and support their own members.

Expanding the mission is the first step in embracing the link between policing and public health outcomes. The authors reference the importance of upstream work and declare that "social determinants of health and social determinants of criminal justice are one and the same" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 104). The authors acknowledge the profound influence of individual adverse experiences on life course trajectories, detrimental health outcomes, and poor outcomes more generally, including encounters with the law (Struck et al., 2021). For these police leaders, expanding the mission depends on a strong and pragmatic focus on changing individual and community health outcomes and recognizing the contributing role that policing can have on these higher-level outcomes.

The proposal that policing shift from positional power to multi-sectoral influence is congruent with a systems and complexity lens. Recognizing that communities are complex and dynamic systems reminds us that relationships between entities and the impacts they have on one another are non-linear and precise predictions of impacts are not possible. Outcomes can be influenced, though not precisely predicted, when care and attention are given to relationships in community. "Each of these outcomes cannot be traced to the actions of any single agent in the system; they emerge due to the combined activity of everyone involved" (Lichtenstein, 2015, p. 448). The quality and nature of relationships between police and other human services and police and citizens will be key factors in transitioning from positional power to multi-sector engagement. This is made even more challenging as police continue to hold powers that are not shared with other community entities or citizens, including the power to execute the law and use force when necessary. Working in this integrated way, it will be important to acknowledge and declare the positionality of police leadership. "Knowledge can never be objective because of our inescapable historicity. We are always situated in a particular "horizon" of understanding that is based on a combination of cultural and personal presuppositions (prejudices)" (Willis, 2007, p. 112). Systems change and transformational leadership requires reflection, openness, assessment, and consideration for social inequities and the influence of power dynamics. Holding awareness of the unavoidable position of power that the police hold and showing up openly and consistently to the "new mission" is likely to create authentic conditions under which new community patterns and relationships can emerge.

The authors' third focus is on police leaders' obligation to develop, serve, and support their own members on this collective journey. It seems logical that if we are seeking innovation, adaptation, and renewed relationships to create conditions for improved safety and well-being within communities, we are best served by creating these same conditions within our own organizations. Working in human services, I have witnessed and been a part of organizational cultures that were not well and were not safe. When working with traumatized citizens, the realities of vicarious trauma and post-traumatic stress add additional pressure on the team and on leaders to create conditions for wellness. "Organizations that provide services to traumatized individuals, families and/or communities are susceptible to becoming traumatized systems" (Hormann & Vivian, 2005. p. 159). The authors propose a recognition of open and closed system dynamics and acknowledge the closed and rigid organizational traditions of policing cultures.

Through a holistic and systems-level view, the authors further point to the connection between these legacy policing approaches and the current questions being raised about the legitimacy of policing. A result of these traditional approaches, according to the authors, is a strained relationship between police and the communities they serve. "[L]ingering adherence to [these] approaches to criminal justice, all relics of the 'professional policing' era from decades ago, have driven a wedge between police and those who need them most, while driving frustration and stress levels to a breaking point for far too many police professionals" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 106). The consequences of these limiting approaches to police leadership and accompanying organizational cultures are evident in a post-2020 world that has been fueled by stresses and decisions related to the COVID pandemic, the symbolic and catalytic death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer, the Black Lives Matter movement, calls to defund police, and, closer to home, the demand for tangible action on Indigenous truth and reconciliation following the discovery of thousands of unmarked graves near former residential schools. These police leaders name the connections and call out a requirement to face these legitimate criticisms. "Successful police executives will be those who quickly recognize and abandon the folly of continuing to model a defensive reflex in the face of community-driven demands for long overdue changes in policy, practice, and in the essential culture of the policing professional" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 105). The authors further acknowledge that it is time for police organizations to "confront and dismantle the intractable traces of colonialism and systemic racism that plague their communities, and yes, which also infect their organizations" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 106).

These statements, coming from renowned police leaders, are bold and aspirational and they leave the reader wondering to what extent the "dismantling of colonialism and systemic racism" can occur through a shift-in-leadership approach. While the proposed transformations to policing leadership in this chapter are critical to changing legacy police systems, many would suggest that these shifts in leadership will be insufficient in creating the changes we seek without also being accompanied by a critical lens and understanding of the institutional, hegemonic structures that are supporting ongoing colonization and systemic racism. Systems change has been identified as "shifting the conditions that are holding a problem in place" (Kania et al., 2018, p. 3). It might be suggested that leadership approach and mindset is one condition and is accompanied by many other structural conditions that are continuing to generate colonialism and systemic racism in our institutions. While leadership is likely a significant part of the

solution going forward, how does meaningful change occur within institutions that have yet to critically examine their own structures, instruments, and ways of being that remain stuck on a colonizing path? Like many other social institutions (including education, child welfare, and religion) in Canada and in most colonized nations across the globe, police forces have been consistently employed as a government-sanctioned tool of colonization.

> Historically, the police enforced laws that were designed to control and ultimately eliminate Indigenous peoples through forced assimilation, dislocation and depriva- tion. These practices included the implementation of a pass system to limit the freedom of movement and the gathering of Indigenous peoples, the criminalization of cultural and spiritual practices, and the forceful removal of Indigenous children from their families and communi- ties in order to deliver them to residential schools against their will. (David & Mitchell, 2021, p. 27)

Just as the authors are transparent about the connection and influence of command-and-control policing on their members and the relationships with the community that ensue from taking such an approach, the role of police as an integral tool in colonization, racism, and genocide must also be declared and accounted for. As a former child welfare worker who did not understand my own connection to the horrid legacy that came before me and the current practices that keep us sleepwalking in colonialism, I share these reflections humbly and with a desire to address not only the symptoms of broken relationships between police and the communities they serve, but to also acknowledge and reconcile the root.

As further guidance on moving forward, the authors propose a concept of "reverse engineering, which requires leaders to examine issues from a macro-level rather than becoming fixated on individual, sector-specific examples" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 102). Using the example of individual pathways through systems, they further propose that com- plete transformation is possible when "deconstructing the issues at hand, and thoroughly examining the parts that make the whole" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 102). What the authors term "reverse engineering" would perhaps more accurately be labelled an examination of relationships and patterns through a systems and complexity lens. It is not the individual parts that create insights on pathways through human services sys- tems as an example but rather the relationships and patterns between these multi-sector systems that reveal opportunities for change and innovation. To understand a complex social system fully and completely is not possible and while "systems thinkers pursue the ideal of comprehensiveness, [they] know that this is unattainable" (Midgley, 2008, p. 66). Understanding nuances of relationships between components is attainable and will increase opportunities for collective influence and change while enhancing the macro-analysis that is proposed in this chapter.

As a final takeaway, I am inspired by the innovation, reflection, and inspiration in this chapter and the commitment to working authentically and collectively with community as "a legitimate business practice, [and not] merely an empty, catch-phrased marketing strategy" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 92). Our current systems and relationships between sectors are perfectly designed for the results we are achieving today, and, in order to change the outcomes, we must change how we engage and work together as a broader, social sector ecosystem. These leader-authors have declared a call to action that creates momentum, hope, and possibility for renewed outcomes in our communities, and these are approaches that change systems. "Passion and aspiration are key drivers of emergence…the positive energy that emergence draws from aspiration, leads to much more creativity and greater potential for successful inno- vation" (Lichtenstein, 2015, p. 447). I look forward to the impact this work will have on global policing and communities, and, like the authors, I "remain optimistic that we are closer than ever to the tipping point of change" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 93).

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