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A Call for Understanding Diversity and Policing


Much of the limited research on sexual orientation in public administration considers discrimination and compliance with antidiscrimination laws (for a review, see Oldfield,
Colvin positions his work in the broader discussion of diversity and public organizations. *Gay and Lesbian Cops: Diversity and Effective Policing* responds to the current call for more empirical work on diversity (see Pitts and Wise 2010; Wise and Tschantz 2000) with an accessible, empirically supported argument for increased diversity within policing organizations. While Colvin starts with the assumption that diversity in public workforces is a positive organizational goal, he goes back to this claim and backs it up with a strong argument that agencies that successfully integrate gay and lesbian police officers are more efficient, effective, and equitable organizations.

Colvin has compiled the largest data set on gay and lesbian police officers thus far, focusing on a non-random, non-jurisdiction-based survey in both the United States and United Kingdom (n = 66 from the United States and n = 243 from the United Kingdom) and extensive interviews, archival work, and focus groups with gay and lesbian police officers in Washington, D.C. (in the United States), and Wiltshire and Hampshire (in the United Kingdom). Throughout, he uses the lens of community policing to argue for the efficiency and effectiveness of integrating gay and lesbian police officers into local jurisdictions. Colvin presents the stories of police officers in their own words in sidebars throughout the book, which he titles “Voices from the Field.” Yet the overall focus of the work is less about the experiences of gay and lesbian officers than about the effectiveness of policing organizations as they increase diversity, integrate minority perspectives within their organizations, and use community policing as a tool to engage with minority communities.

Colvin could be criticized for focusing on the organizational changes and increasing professionalism in policing agencies in recent decades rather than taking a broader cultural look at the changing landscape of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) communities in the United States and United Kingdom. However, this turns out to be where his work excels. By exploring the changing organizational structures and cultures of these local public agencies, this work serves as a real resource for public administration scholars. Rather than an in-depth historical or cultural exploration of social identities in the workplace, Colvin takes an organizational view, looking, first and foremost, at how organizations have adapted to their changing cultural landscapes. Colvin focuses on how policing organizations adapt well to change and have worked to integrate gay and lesbian officers into their ranks. He argues convincingly that organizational change and integration of gay and lesbian officers provides for better community policing, stronger police agencies, and stronger relationships with the communities that police departments serve.

Colvin works to describe the challenges and benefits of recognizing and integrating gay and lesbian police officers into organizations and communities from a research perspective. In addition, he focuses on how to create practical change. After a basic introduction and overview of the book in chapter 1 (“Gay and Lesbian Police Officers”), in chapter 2 (“Old Issues, New Realities”), he elaborates on his call to “serve as a blueprint and an inspiration for police agencies and other public service workplaces to become more efficient, effective, and equitable through inclusion and diversity” (10), as he lays out the importance of recognizing social identities within the workplace and integrating representative perspectives through planned organizational change. He focuses specifically on the case of Camden, New Jersey. The Camden Police Department used the planned organizational change process to identify systemic problems in the organization and develop action plans to address the 75 recommendations for organizational, administrative, and police related problems.

Chapter 3 (“Law Enforcement’s Move Toward Diversity”) provides a basic historical discussion of policing and professionalization of police in the United States and United Kingdom, which leads into his empirical work in chapters 4–6 (“Officer Experiences and Perceptions,” “Unique Roles, Unique Contributions,” and “Urban and Rural Contexts”). From the surveys of gay and lesbian police officers in the United States and United Kingdom, Colvin mostly provides basic descriptive statistics noting perceived career barriers, demographics, and perceptions of treatment within policing organizations. The bulk of the empirical focus is on in-depth case studies of departments in the United States and United Kingdom. Using urban and rural departments, Colvin lays out cases of how integration can happen, focusing on the visibility and acceptance of gay and lesbian officers through cultural and organizational change. Specifically, he focuses on critical incidents within each community and how the police department responded.

The book concludes with more of the “how to” of organizational and policy change (chapter 8, “Best Practices for Recruitment and Human Resources,” and chapter 9, “Roadmap for the Future”). Colvin suggests best practices that deal with broad structural and cultural issues around integrating gay and lesbian police officers, as well as specific practices such as developing gay and lesbian liaison units.

While Colvin’s focus is clearly on gay and lesbian police officers, his call is far broader. He uses
a focused look at sexual orientation as a social identity to call for a more nuanced understanding of how diversity affects public service organizations and the communities they serve. While the representative bureaucracy literature in public administration often looks at outcomes for citizens or workers within organizations (see Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003 for an overview), Colvin takes a nuanced view at how social identity frames the work of police officers and how they work within their organizations. He provides an introductory level explanation of social identities and the current state of research on identities in the workplace, noting the invisibility of sexual orientation as a social identity in comparison to race, ethnicity, and gender. He argues that we cannot draw direct parallels between social identities when studying diversity (13). However, he goes on to recognize organizational- and professional-level changes that make integration of diverse perspectives more likely regardless of social identity, making his work accessible and applicable to scholars, practitioners, and students who are interested in social equity or social justice more broadly.

The comparative aspect of Colvin’s work is a significant strength. He focuses on two cultural milestones—the Stonewall riot in New York City and the murder of Stephen Lawrence in the United Kingdom—to draw similarities and comparisons regarding cultural change and political context. This cross-cultural comparison allows for a focus on how organizations structure integration of diverse social identities, even with differences in local government environments. However, he notes that in the United States in particular, antidiscrimination laws have been most prolific at the local level (11). And yet, local conditions vary widely for LGBTQ communities across the United States, and with more than 15,000 police agencies in the United States, the local government context matters a great deal. This focus on local government integration of diversity is important throughout the work, but it is never fully explored for the structural and cultural influence that it has on the important topic of police agency diversity.

Colvin is quick, however, to note his limitations, and he does not attempt to extend the generalizations of his study too far. For example, he notes that his focus on gay and lesbian police officers does not necessarily extend to understanding the experiences of bisexual and/or transsexual police officers. He is also cognizant of the need for further, more nuanced research. While he has provided the most comprehensive empirical exploration of the experiences of gay and lesbian police officers to date, his data remain simplistic, focusing mostly on basic descriptive analysis from his survey and supporting narratives in the form of “Voices from the Field” from his interviews.

His work excels in the cases that he presents from single agencies. Specifically, he is successful in rooting the agencies in the context of their local environment and fleshing out how organizational structures have adapted over time. Much of the early work on diversity in public administration considered compliance with antidiscrimination policies or recruitment for diversity (see Riccucci 2002 for a review). This work goes beyond considerations of compliance or recruitment to explore how organizations adapt to cultural change. Colvin situates his discussion in the context of greater professionalization of policing generally, as well as the development of professional organizations specific to gay and lesbian police officers in both the United States and United Kingdom. Overall, Colvin provides a breadth in his exploration of the experiences of gay and lesbian police officers in the United States and United Kingdom while positioning the reader for a desire for more depth.

Gay and Lesbian Cops ultimately provides an argument for more research on social identities and evolving policing rather than a definitive guide to the gay and lesbian experience of police officers in the United States or United Kingdom. With accessible writing that can be easily integrated into undergraduate and graduate courses, Colvin invites us to think more deeply about the diversity within policing organizations and how this extends into the communities they serve. Policing agencies are a prominent part of local governments and one of the most recognizable public service organizations. The themes, concepts, and structures that Colvin describes in local policing agencies can easily be considered in other public workplaces and local government organizations.

References