Bruised Badges: The Moral Risks of Police Work and a Call for Officer Wellness

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ABSTRACT: The paper takes the position that efforts to eliminate all acts of police misconduct are misguided, because much of this behavior appears to be a natural byproduct of routine police practices. Instead, it is important for police executives to understand the various factors that foster police misconduct. This awareness can be accompanied by appropriate changes to the culture of the organization, which will lead to destigmatizing less egregious acts and a recommitment to fair and consistent discipline. First, the discussion focuses on the individual characteristic of integrity. The potential negative impact on police officer integrity caused by the job itself is presented. Then, to help understand why personal integrity may decline while working as a police officer, a variety of theories to explain unethical decision-making are presented. Based on these explanations, numerous prevention and intervention strategies are offered for organizations to develop more far-reaching approaches to combat misconduct. Reinterpreting integrity as a perishable skill, rather than as a fixed personality characteristic, enables police executives to institute specific improvements to training, supervision, and disciplinary practices.

KEYWORDS: Integrity, Ethical decision-making, Preventing police misconduct, Wellness, Emotional intelligence

INTRODUCTION

It is not hyperbolic to suggest that tensions between the police and the public in many communities is at an all-time high. Conflicts exist despite active efforts on the part of law enforcement agencies, community leaders, schools, and public, private, and non-profit organizations to improve relations. Although small steps of progress occur, there remains fairly intractable mistrust on both sides.

To a large degree, police misconduct is responsible for eroding public trust. Such behavior is highlighted in frequent media reports of excessive or unnecessary force as well as in the now fairly routine cases of overturned convictions based on unethical investigative techniques. Many people are simply afraid of their local police officers (Kendall, 2015). Despite the efforts of police executives to develop benevolent and trustworthy relationships between their officers and the local community, tensions between the two sides still exist.

Aims of Present Paper

The present paper attempts to shine a different light on the issue of police misconduct. First, the authors emphasize personal integrity and discuss ways in which this characteristic may decline among law enforcement personnel because of routine police practices. Then, in an effort to understand this phenomenon and because a comprehensive police-specific theory does not yet exist, the authors explore, in great detail, existing theories of ethical decision-making, and directly relate them to current police practices. Taken together these various theories help to explain why working as a police officer can foster a reduction in one’s commitment to ethical principles and actions.
In the end, the authors argue for changing the narrative about police misconduct. Instead of focusing primarily on the impossible task of eliminating all forms of misconduct, steps can be taken to destigmatize the majority of unethical behavior, to understand that it is fairly predictable, and to establish consistent and constructive disciplinary responses that would reverse or even prevent such phenomena from happening. These efforts will help to enable individuals and organizations to intervene at the earliest signs of misconduct when careers can be saved and the most serious harm may be able to be prevented.

**POLICE MISCONDUCT: THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS and PRACTICAL DILEMMAS**

The conversation about police misconduct typically centers on a rather dichotomous discussion between individuals (i.e., Bad apples) and police organizations (Caldero & Crank, 2011; Dean, Bell, & Lauchs, 2010; Heffernan, 1982; Klockars et al., 2000; Klockars, Ivkovic, & Haberfield, 2004, 2006; Miller & Braswell, 1992; Schafer & Martinelli, 2008). Police misconduct should be viewed from both individual and organizational parameters, especially when it comes to developing intervention and prevention strategies. Nevertheless, scholars continue to discuss: how to label deviant behavior among police officers; what constitutes corruption; if corruption is or is not distinguishable from police misconduct, and so forth (Stinson, Liederbach, & Brewer, 2016). This may serve an important role when seeking to achieve a greater understanding of behavioral outcomes, particularly in relation to developing policies to deal with these various problematic behaviors. At the same time, however, this conceptual debate, from a purely psychological perspective, is too abstract, because it does not go far enough to examine personality and motivational factors.

Conversely, when one emphasizes individual dimensions, the dialogue shifts from one of organizational policy to the concept of police officers’ personality and decision-making. From this perspective, it is not very helpful to reduce the argument to a dichotomy between keeping “good” cops and weeding out “bad” cops, especially because the vast majority of individuals who enter law enforcement have honorable intentions to maintain peace and order in the communities they serve. Rather, the more constructive approach examines police officers’ ethical decision-making. One can argue that ethical decision-making generally leads to ethical behavior, and, conversely, unethical decision-making is likely to lead to unethical behavior.1

A recent extensive analysis of the most serious cases of police misconduct (i.e., When a police officer is arrested for his/her behavior) found that “police crimes are not uncommon” (Stinson et al., 2016). Certainly, there are far more less-serious incidents of misconduct, which result in outcomes less severe than an officer’s arrest (e.g., Termination, administrative discipline, etc). Therefore, considering the ubiquitousness of police misconduct, a logical starting place is to examine if some police officers are more likely than others to make unethical decisions.

**POLICE INTEGRITY and ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING**

Integrity is a personality trait that is strongly associated with ethical decision-making. According to Schlenker (2008), “Integrity involves honesty, trustworthiness, fidelity in keeping one’s word and obligations, and incorruptibility, or an unwillingness to violate principles regardless of the temptations, costs, and preferences of others.” In this model, the opposite of integrity is expediency, which involves “the ideas that principles can and should be tailored to fit the context, that it is important to take advantage of profitable opportunities and foolish to fail to do so, and that deviations from principles can usually be justified” (Schlenker, 2008). One can infer, then, that some unethical behavior will be committed by police officers who are capable of embracing expedient beliefs.

**The Integrity Scale**

The Integrity Scale (Schlenker, 2008) was developed and validated over a series of studies with college students. The scale also has been used with nursing students (Kruger, 2014) and with West Point cadets (Graves et al., 2010). Items measure one’s unwillingness to rationalize unprincipled behavior, one’s commitment to principles despite temptations, and one’s belief in the inherent importance of principled conduct (Miller & Schlenker, 2011). Validation studies confirmed that integrity, as measured by the scale, is a single latent dimension that is separate from other factors (e.g., Moral disengagement, Machiavellianism), which are thought to be related to ethical or antisocial behavior: “Integrity thus provides a distinctive individual difference variable that is useful in predicting the violation of moral rules” (Schlenker, 2008); the higher one’s score is on the scale, the greater the commitment to ethical principles. The scale includes many items that represent ethical decisions, which are routinely faced by police officers.

A recent study (Blumberg, Giromini, & Jacobson, 2016) administered the Integrity Scale to police recruits. This study found that police recruit participants scored higher on the Integrity Scale prior to police academy training than the college students who participated in the Scale’s development studies (Blumberg et al., 2016). This is a reassuring finding. First, it signifies that law enforcement agencies generally do not hire “bad apples,” which can be attributed to comprehensive pre-hire background investigations and assessments, including thorough psychological evaluations. Moreover, these findings support the contention that most individuals who seek careers in law enforcement do so with noble intentions (Caldero & Crank, 2011) and confirm Ford’s (2003) claim that police recruits enter the profession with high integrity. Indeed, research findings regarding individuals’ motivations to join NYPD showed that a significant percentage of recruits entered law enforcement for the opportunity to serve their communities and to help people (Raganella & White, 2004; White, Cooper, Saunders, & Raganella, 2010). Together, these findings serve to disprove anecdotal contentions that the main reason individuals seek police jobs is a desire for power, authority, and control.

**The Role of Police Training on Integrity**

The next step is to explore the impact of police training on integrity. Some researchers (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Ford, 2003; Garner, 2005) suggested that the nature of law

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1 For the present purposes, the term police misconduct is used to describe all types of unethical behaviors by police officers.
enforcement training, beginning in the academy, plays a role (e.g., Solely paramilitary training, low emphasis on interpersonal relations, inadequate communication training) in leading police officers towards unethical decision-making. This is a compelling position, which is consistent with several theories of ethical decision-making that will be presented later in this paper, and remains a viable area of continued exploration. However, Blumberg and colleagues (2016) compared their participants’ Integrity Scale scores from prior to academy training with scores obtained at the conclusion of academy training and found that, overall, police academy training had “minimal or no impact on the recruits’ levels of self-reported integrity” (Blumberg et al., 2016). Thus, at least while still in the confines of the training environment, there were no significant changes in recruits’ integrity. This does not mean that the academy training-content and delivery-had no deleterious impact on recruits’ integrity. It only demonstrates that any negative impact was not significantly apparent upon academy graduation.

After graduating from the police academy, the newly sworn officers begin training in the field, followed by a probationary period of employment. Research demonstrated that police recruits start and finish their academy training with higher than average levels of self-reported integrity (Blumberg et al., 2016). However, it is not particularly uncommon for police officers to engage in ethically questionable behaviors (Stinson et al., 2016).

Although the effect size was small (d = 0.29) and the response rate was low, Blumberg & Giromini (unpublished manuscript) found a statistically significant decline in self-reported integrity scores among recent academy graduates after they served as patrol officers for one year. Specifically, some officers were more willing to endorse items that rationalize unprincipled behavior after only one year in the field than they were before they started working as police officers. This finding indicates that police work during the first year after academy training may play a crucial role in lowering officers’ commitment to ethical principles. Although that study did not assess actual unethical behavior, the increase in expedient beliefs can be viewed as, at least, a potential downward trend in which violations of ethical rules can be predicted (Schlenker, 2008). Further research is needed to assess the course of self-reported integrity throughout officers’ careers, but the decline in these early career officers’ integrity scores was noteworthy.

This last conclusion leads to an extremely important discussion about the reasons why, after a relatively short tenure in their jobs, police officers might experience personal integrity decline. The literature on ethical decision-making provides numerous answers and, towards this direction, there are many theories to explain why people act unethically. Each of these theories now will receive a detailed examination vis-à-vis typical police practices and the nature of police officers’ routine daily duties. Such an analysis will help to guide intervention and preventative strategies.

Although future research is encouraged to test some of these theories with a police sample, preventative and intervention strategies should not wait for such empirical validation; existing findings are robust, albeit on populations other than police officers. In addition to helping police executives and researchers/scholars to understand how these phenomena manifest in law enforcement, the following discussion relates these theories of unethical behavior to the routine practices of police officers in an effort to normalize and destigmatize the fact that misconduct will continue to occur.

ETIOLOGY of POLICE OFFICERS’ UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR

This section examines the literature on ethical decision-making through the lenses of law enforcement training, typical police practices, and police officers’ routine on-duty experiences. A core assumption at this point is that a reduction in personal integrity may make it easier for a person to decide to commit an unethical act. However, as will become clear, a decline in personal integrity is not necessary for one to engage in ethically ambiguous behaviors. In fact, some of these behaviors are committed by police officers who maintain a morally superior attitude (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Nevertheless, a thorough discussion of this area of the literature is essential to demonstrate the extent to which police executives and policy makers actually can contribute to the very problem, which they intend to solve.

Organizational Explanations for Unethical Behavior

It is not an outright indictment of all law enforcement agencies to assert that there are current practices associated with fostering unethical behavior by police officers. There are rather routine habits in local government and police administration, which are themselves of questionable ethicality and which serve as fairly poor models for the rank and file. For example, the awarding of some contracts or occasional requests for nepotism-related preferential treatment demonstrates a blurry ethical line.

Organizations are responsible for setting the ethical tone at all levels of the workforce. Employees learn whether or not a particular behavior is ethically acceptable and, perhaps just as importantly, they are taught how deviations from ethically acceptable behavior are handled by the organization. It has been proposed that organizations often normalize unethical behavior (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Specifically, through processes of acculturation and institutionalization, ethically questionable behaviors can be taught, fostered, condoned, and perpetuated “…to such an extent that individuals may be unable to see the inappropriateness of their behavior” (Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

Police training indoctrinates new hires to become successful officers (Berg, 1990; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Haarr, 2001). This is often accomplished through modeling as newer employees attempt to adopt the values of training officers (Bennett, 1984) and peers (Haarr, 2005). At the same time, however, part of the training overemphasizes the dangerousness of the job by constantly stressing physical survival on the streets at all costs (Ford, 2003). Although safety should never be compromised, training could present the job’s dangerousness more accurately to avoid instilling new officers with an unrealistically threatening availability heuristic.

Training also highlights and promotes unethical and ethically ambiguous behaviors and attitudes of veteran officers (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Garner, 2005). This creates organizational structures that reinforce officers’ unconscious adoption of unethical behavior. Blumberg et al. (2016) summarized research
in this area: “Specifically, byproducts of the training may be (a) to foster us versus them attitudes, (b) to instill strong bonds among (officers) in order to rely on each other to stay out of trouble or to avoid punishment, (c) to learn that there is a difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law (i.e., Police officers often have to use discretion), and, (d) to understand that morality is sometimes situational or relative, for example, police officers are legally permitted to lie to or deceive a suspect.”

In addition to training factors, various operational practices help to explain unethical police behavior. For example, Brown et al. (2010) suggested that when organizations quantify a job, employees may find it impractical to be empathic towards others. In this regard, law enforcement organizations that overemphasize the number of tickets, contacts and arrests, out of service time, calls responded to, response times, and crime statistics are perpetuating a dehumanizing narrative (Brown et al., 2010), which makes it more likely that officers will make unethical decisions. This is not to malign the effectiveness of the more obvious organizational attempts to prevent and/or confront misconduct (e.g., Strong Professional Integrity Units and the availability of wellness, psychological services, and peer support services), discussed in more detail in the last section of the present paper. Instead, these dehumanizing practices serve as a catalyst for creating an organizational culture, which is conducive to changing police officers at an individual level in ways that help to explain their unethical decision-making.

A related concept that can help to explain unethical behavior by police officers is noble cause corruption. The noble cause is a moral commitment by most police officers to protect society and to maintain peace and order (Caldero & Crank, 2011). Law enforcement organizations foster corruption of the noble cause by condoning police work in which the ends (public safety and crime control) justify the means (Use of deception, breaking rules to catch offenders, etc.) (Crank, Flaherty, & Giacomazzi, 2007). This parallels findings from the world of business where “cutting corners” may be viewed as acceptable; this can be particularly insidious in light of most police officers’ primary reason for entering the field in the first place (Baron, Zhao, & Miao, 2015).

Therefore, it may be important for law enforcement organizations to tread carefully and recognize differences in officers’ primary motives for becoming a police officer. Some may view their primary role as a crime fighter, while others joined the field to be of service to the community. The job requires both roles (Manzella & Papazoglou, 2014), which are often incompatible; protecting the public and serving the public are not always experienced as concordant responsibilities (Cooper, 2012, Crank et al., 2007). For many officers, much of their time is spent performing duties associated with the job of a social worker rather than actual crime fighting. This may lead some to experience role conflict, which can lead to noble cause corruption (Cooper, 2012).

Additionally, when law enforcement organizations promote the noble cause, they essentially invite officers to engage in behaviors that are known to be a violation of policy or law. This form of misconduct is often committed by groups of officers (e.g., Excessive force on an already subdued suspect) because of implicit or explicit peer pressure (Porter & Warrender, 2009). Rather than being premeditated, though, this form of unethical behavior tends to be a situational response to circumstances (e.g., Coercing a confession from a suspect in an attempt to secure a conviction) (Porter & Warrender, 2009).

Individual Explanations for Unethical Behavior

The organizational influences weigh heavily on officers and directly impact their decision-making capabilities. This section presents many theories that explain why individuals engage in ethically questionable behaviors, which can help elucidate how personal integrity can decline in police officers. These theories are not mutually exclusive; some overlap with each other, while others seem to build on each other to clarify this complex subject. In the end, no single explanation is possible or, frankly, should be sought. Instead, a multifaceted analysis of sources of unethical decision-making by police officers can lead to a far more vigorous and comprehensive set of prevention and intervention strategies.

Moral Compromise

The regular use of discretion by police officers, a practice that should never be constrained, nevertheless, can be considered a precursor to ethically questionable behavior. Officers are taught and encouraged to use their judgment when applying the spirit of the law. Law enforcement agencies constantly receive input from community groups regarding enforcement priorities in those communities. This input is communicated to officers on the streets who are faced with a constant balancing act. Crank et al. (2007) explained “…that serious crimes are more likely to result in arrest suggest that police are committed to a utilitarian ethic that weighs more importantly the greater good brought about by serious crime arrests than arrests simply based on legal criteria.”

Nevertheless, this routinely exposes police officers to situations in which they are forced to make moral compromises, such as “when legality conflicts with other values, like effectiveness, efficiency, and possibly even the public interest” (Loyens, 201). Thus, officers learn that certain crimes may be ignored, while some behaviors, which previously led to arrest, are no longer to be treated as crimes. In some jurisdictions, officers are explicitly instructed that they are supposed to treat certain members of the community differently from others. For example, officers are told that some misdemeanors committed by homeless persons in one large metropolitan community are no longer to be considered crimes, while the same behaviors by others remain grounds for arrest.

These situations in which police officers are forced to make moral compromises may lead to a decline in personal integrity. Specifically, in order to competently perform the routine duties of their jobs, police officers’ conduct is, at times, in conflict with their deeply held values, e.g., to serve and protect (Benjamin, 1990). Throughout their police career, officers’ personal values can be pitted against their role as law enforcers, including situations when interacting with those involved in the adult entertainment industry, medical marijuana dispensaries, sex workers, drug addicts, and so forth. In such circumstances, research on cognitive dissonance

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2 For that matter, officers routinely have to adapt to decriminalization of various laws, which reflects the moral relativity of society, e.g., marijuana legalization.
(Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) demonstrated that either officers change their behavior, which is not possible if they want to keep their jobs (Haarr, 2005), or they will begin to experience shifts in their personal values.

**Moral Injury**

One consequence of moral compromise is moral injury. “Moral injury is a particular type of psychological trauma characterized by intense guilt, shame, and spiritual crisis, which can develop when one violates his or her moral beliefs, is betrayed, or witnesses trusted individuals committing atrocities” (Jinkerson, 2016). Certainly, the extent of trauma experienced by many police officers is well understood (Papazoglou, 2013), and there is increasing awareness of the extent to which those suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may resort to unethical behavior (LaMotte & Murphy, 2017). Furthermore, Papazoglou and Chopko (2017) suggested that police moral injury may lead to officers’ susceptibility to PTSD and compassion fatigue, as well as to emotional and moral exhaustion. Therefore, moral injury may be another source of unethical decision-making among police officers.

**Moral Distress**

Moral distress has been defined as the psychological disequilibrium and inner conflict experienced by caregiving professionals when they are confronted with situations that prevent them from doing what is morally right (Jameton, 1984). In police work, many officers may experience distress when faced with the reality that they are not able to adequately attend or sufficiently help everyone who asks for police assistance. For that matter, they can begin to feel ineffective when racing from one call for service to the next, i.e., often not having enough time to thoroughly do what they think they could have done to help. In other cases, officers are required to enforce the law and to use force when necessary (e.g., Crowd management during demonstrations), even in situations where they may not see the appropriateness. The dilemma occurs when officers are faced with a conflict between what they believe is morally right and what they are ordered by their supervisors to do or by what the organization’s policies mandate them to do (Kälvenmark et al., 2004; Papazoglou & Chopko, 2017). Therefore, moral distress may lead officers to experience guilt, shame, and burnout, which jeopardize their foundational values of integrity, citizenship, justice, and pride (Laguna, Linn, Ward, & Ruplaukyte, 2010; Miller, 2000).

**Clinical Conditions**

Beyond the potential to experience symptoms associated with PTSD, compassion fatigue, moral injury, burnout, etc. due to various work-related stressors, police officers are susceptible to developing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Santa Maria et al., 2018). This is especially troubling in light of research that found that such clinical conditions appear to increase incidents of unethical behavior (Kouchaki & Desai, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). It appears that anxious people, particularly, are more likely to shift their focus away from what is ethically correct and to act in more self-serving ways. Although this link has not been studied directly with police officers, the inference is that anxious and depressed police officers may be more prone to behave unethetically.

**Moral Licensing**

Another theory addresses a potential consequence of police officers’ positive use of discretion. After giving a warning rather than a ticket or sending a pre-teen shoplifter home rather than to juvenile hall, police officers may feel as though they have earned a metaphorical pass on a future unethical decision. They essentially give themselves a license to be bad after “banking” credits for being good (Merritt et al., 2012; Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). Results from numerous studies have demonstrated that people may feel entitled to act unethically after behaving in an ethically responsible way (Blanken, van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015). From the police officers’ perspective, the misconduct may be fairly minor, such as justifying leaving work early, conducting personal business (e.g., Stopping at the bank or dry cleaners) on duty, or accepting a small gratuity after doing a good job. Research has shown, moreover, that this moral licensing “...is most likely to occur in situations where multiple goals conflict” (Mullen & Monin, 2016).

More specifically, and quite germane to the discussion of the relations between the community and the police, research on moral licensing has shown that people may be more likely to express prejudiced attitudes after establishing some *bona fides* that they are not racist or sexist (Monin & Miller, 2001). By acting in a non-racist or sexist manner (e.g., comforting a female victim), police officers may believe that they have demonstrated moral credentials, which would mitigate negative reactions to future expressions of prejudiced attitudes.

In some rather astounding recent research, Cascio and Plant (2015) demonstrated a phenomenon they refer to as prospective moral licensing. They found that people will behave in “morally dubious ways by giving themselves credit for something they have not actually done,” but “what they think they will do” at some point in the future. It remains to be seen if similar findings would be observed with a sample of police officers, but there is no denying that police officers know with great confidence that their future behavior will include good deeds. As well, it is not uncommon to see officers acting in this way. For example, many officers (as well as police executives) ask for and expect admission and access to restricted areas of concerts and sporting events when they are in uniform, but not even working the event. The concept of moral licensing, based on the establishment of moral credits and moral credentials (and possibly future moral behavior), presents an additional challenge to police executives who seek effective strategies to curtail unethical behavior.

For example, commendation and discipline processes in police departments can encourage moral licensing when agencies are not careful about monitoring and demanding consistency from supervisors. Whether through written evaluations, written commendations, or even simple verbal appreciation and recognition, if one leader does it well for his/her team and another leader does not, it can create a sense of entitlement to “self reward” or pay oneself back for what a good leader should have noticed, commended, and rewarded. The same is true with the infliction of discipline. When those who comply with ethical rules see others not being held accountable it is easier to rationalize future indiscretions or take advantage because they have been performing as better officers by comparison.
Moral licensing also can take the form of a job performance slowdown when officers have had something taken away (Pay or benefits), been asked to “do more with less,” or, particularly, when departments are under public scrutiny for an incident that is being investigated. For example, it is not uncommon to hear an officer say, “If I’m not worth a 5% pay raise due to budget constraints, maybe I should reduce my activity by 5%.”

Future-Self Orientation

Research has shown that short-term unethical behavior is likely to occur when people are disconnected from their future self (Bartels & Rip, 2010; Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012). Specifically, “lies, bribes, false promises, and cheating” increased when participants did “not have a good sense of how my self will feel in the future” (Hershfield et al., 2012). It is believed that this may be due to a desire to “speed up rewards” in the present time (Bartels & Rip, 2010).

One can argue that it would not be uncommon for police officers to lack continuity between their present and future self. This stems from present law enforcement training practices that accentuate dangerousness (Ford, 2003) as well as a prominent availability heuristic derived from near constant media reports of on-duty injuries to and deaths of police officers. Additionally, even if it is apocryphal, a common belief among police officers is that their post-retirement lifespan is rather short. Therefore, when police officers do not foresee a positive or healthy future self, they may feel less concerned about making unethical decisions in the present time.

Another form of a lack of future-self orientation stems from officers’ looking unsuccessfully at their career opportunities. Officers usually carry a stigmatizing tail (Spoken or unspoken) after being disciplined, even if only for a minor indiscretion. Knowing that a promotion or a transfer to a specialized unit may no longer be an option or may be on hold for an inordinate length of time, officers’ motivation may wane. This leaves them with a narrow career focus with few or dim future opportunities. Additionally, the same challenge to one’s future-self orientation occurs among candidates who are unsuccessful in a promotional process. It becomes difficult to see beyond the “shame of their failure.” They may resent the department for passing them over and may struggle to accept that they will not get the raise or the aspired promotion envisioned in their future plan. These feelings can contribute to the short-term reward mentally, which may lead to unethical behaviors (Hershfield et al., 2012; Bartels & Rip, 2010).

Slippery Slope

Research on the slippery slope helps to explain how unethical behavior can evolve. Welsh et al. (2015) found that “small indiscretions may snowball into major violations over time if left unchecked.” Additionally, Zhang, Cornwell, and Higgins (2014) determined that people are likely to repeat their ethical or unethical behavior in a manner that is consistent with their previous decision. Thus, rather than recoiling from a transgression with a return to moral behavior, the slippery slope serves a disinhibiting effect, whereby one unethical decision makes it easier to repeat and, even to commit greater, unethical acts. These findings suggest that police officers, for instance, may consider certain behaviors too trivial, like leaving a little earlier and then a little earlier, veering out of their division or patrol beat, conducting a little personal business on duty, and so forth. Although it remains to be tested empirically how these “minor-wrongdoings” may lead to greater acts of misconduct, results from research on the slippery slope should alert police executives to develop early prevention strategies to combat police misconduct.

The Role of Emotions and Intuition

A compelling perspective in the literature on ethical decision-making focuses less on the cognitive processes associated with a moral decision and more on intuitive and emotional experiences (Dienstbier et al., 1975; Haidt, 2001). Zhong (2011) explained: “Thus, rather than viewing the formation of moral judgments as applying a set of neatly derived, universally applicable laws of logic, recent research on moral intuition and embodied morality proposes a messier picture in which morality is grounded in our flesh and bones and intertwined with emotions, tactile sensory input, and other concrete somatic experiences.” Specifically, his research showed that intuitive conditions led to better moral decision-making than strictly deliberative decision-making conditions.

At the same time, there are potentially negative consequences of these intuitive decision-making conditions. Haidt et al. (1997) discussed the role that the emotion of disgust plays in individuals’ judgments of what is morally reprehensible. Such a feeling is deeply ingrained in human physiological and tactile sensations associated with physical cleanliness, such that “moral intuitions may stem from socially adapted experiences of purity violations. Thus, it is no surprise that disgust, the signature emotional reaction to purity violations, plays an important role in determining moral judgment” (Zhong, 2011). It appears, then, that ethical decision-making is impacted when individuals are physically disgusted, particularly to others’ “lack of cleanliness.”

The previous concern is extremely relevant when discussing unethical behavior among police officers. Police officers are trained to be vigilant, which tends to make them quite sensitive to sensory stimuli. On a daily basis, police officers encounter people and situations that are filthy and smelly, living conditions that seem uninhabitable, and circumstances that are, simply, to many people perceived as disgusting. Officers are frequently mandated to touch people covered with various bodily fluids or remain alert so as not to be infected by others’ contagious diseases or stuck by hypodermic needles left in people’s pockets. The resulting level of disgust may contribute to dehumanizing those with whom they come in contact, which makes it less discordant to treat them unethically.

A different aspect of intuitive decision-making stems from the physiological state that most people experience when they contemplate acting immorally. Research consistently demonstrated that people tend to react to impending unethical behavior, such as lying and cheating, with negative somatic conditions (e.g., Sweaty palms, elevated heart rate) (Zhong, 2011). This suggests that people who are desensitized to acting deceptively will feel less guilt which results in milder, if any, negative somatic states. Without the role of these physiological reactions, people may be more likely to make unethical decisions. Once again, although this is something to be explored empirically, it is possible to infer from the existing
literature that police training, which includes considerable amounts of repetition, reduces police officers’ physiological reactions to, for example, their legally approved acts of deception, which may in turn make them less intrinsically aversive to acting unethically.

Beyond the relationship between physiological and emotional states vis-à-vis ethical behavior, recent research demonstrated the important role that emotions play in ethical decision-making (Fida et al., 2015; Krishnakumar & Rymph, 2012). In very clear terms, Krishnakumar and Rymph (2012) wrote: “The more skilled a person is in dealing with his/her emotions, the more likely that person is to make more ethical decisions.” Their research showed that less ethical decisions were made by people who experienced higher levels of negative emotions, but that individuals with high emotional intelligence made better decisions possibly because they were better able to cope with their negative emotions. Furthermore, Fida et al. (2015) showed that negative emotions, which resulted from frustrating work situations, led to greater rationalization of unethical work behaviors. They posited that “the perception of organizational context as unsupportive may reduce empathy and therefore facilitate the activation of cognitive processes aimed at reducing guilt or shame that would deter resorting to harmful actions....”

Taken together, the literature on emotions and ethical decision-making is central to any discussion of police integrity. Police officers routinely find themselves in situations that evoke strong emotions and include encountering every form of human suffering and depravity. However, they also involve frustrations associated with organizational practices, administrative bureaucracy, and the realities of the criminal justice system. Although high emotional intelligence may mitigate the impact that these intense emotions have on police officers’ ethical decision-making, when it comes to reducing police misconduct, greater attention needs to be given to emotional regulation and emotion-centered prevention strategies.

**Moral Disengagement**

One of the most comprehensive theories to explain why people make unethical decisions is moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). Essentially, to commit an unethical act, people have to “turn off” the processes that would typically inhibit them from behaving unethically (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008). The result is that people justify their unethical behavior through a variety of self-deceptive measures (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Bandura (1999) described eight mechanisms through which moral disengagement occurs. Each of these mechanisms serves to distance the person from feeling morally responsible for committing unethical behavior by: reducing the perceived seriousness of the act (Moral Justification, Advantageous Comparison, and Euphemistic Labeling); reducing the perceived negative ramifications of the act (Disregard or Distortion of Consequences); minimizing one’s role in committing the act (Displacement of Responsibility and Diffusion of Responsibility); or, shifting the focus of the act onto the recipients of the act by seeing them as deserving (Dehumanization) or even responsible for the act (Attribution of Blame) (Bandura, 1999).

Research on moral disengagement has been informative. In a longitudinal study of adolescents, moral disengagement predicted levels of aggression and violence (Paciello et al., 2008). In the workplace, moral disengagement has been shown to “initiate... facilitate... (and) perpetuate corruption” (Moore, 2008). In a more recent series of studies, Moore and her colleagues (2012) found that “the propensity to morally disengage correlates positively with Machiavellianism and relativism; negatively with moral identity, empathy, cognitive moral development, idealism, and dispositional guilt; and is not significantly correlated with dispositional shame.” Furthermore, studying a sample of police detectives, Loyens (2014) demonstrated the extent to which “rule bending” was explained by moral justification and displacement of responsibility. Loyens (2014) stressed that these mechanisms are rooted in social contexts, which include job characteristics, such that “sometimes situational aspects or organizational patterns can even ‘override’ individual values and compel people to engage in actions they would otherwise not take part in.”

Each of the following mechanisms, through which moral disengagement occurs, can be demonstrated through the lenses of routine police training, organizational priorities and policies, peer interaction, and officer wellness.

**Moral justification:** Moral justification occurs when “detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes” (Bandura, 1999). This appears to be the basic mechanism when considering noble cause corruption (Caldero & Cran; Cran, Flaherty, & Giacomazzi, 2007; Loyens, 2014). For example, police officers may feel justified when breaking a rule to apprehend a criminal or when deceiving a witness to obtain cooperation.

**Euphemistic labeling:** Euphemistic labeling occurs when “language is widely used to make harmful conduct respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it” (Bandura, 1999). This can be done at an organizational level through creative spin doctoring, which dilutes the significance of a morally ambiguous or unjust action. For example, relocating homeless people from their preferred location may be viewed as more acceptable or less disruptive by calling it a “homeless sweep.” Similarly, on an individual level, language euphemisms facilitate the self-deception that may be necessary to make one’s own unethical behavior less inconsistent with one’s moral self-concept (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). For example, the terms “deceptive devices” and “creative investigative techniques” can be used to describe numerous types of morally questionable law enforcement activities, which do not cause police officers to doubt whether or not they are behaving unethically in such situations.

**Advantageous comparison:** In advantageous comparison, “How a behavior is viewed is colored by what it is compared against. By exploiting the contrast principle, reprehensible acts can be made righteous” (Bandura, 1999). When the unethical behavior of officers from a particular law enforcement agency dominates a news cycle (e.g., the LAPD officers’ treatment of Rodney King), it is easy for top executives from other agencies to minimize the severity of their own officers’ behavior. This also may happen on a micro-level when officers learn of a colleague’s termination for an egregious act and feel as though their moral indiscretions are quite innocuous.

**Displacement of responsibility:** Displacement of responsibility occurs when people “view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities; they do not feel personally...
... responsible for the actions” (Bandura, 1999). History is filled with deplorable examples of people attempting to mitigate responsibility by claiming that they were just following orders (e.g., Nazi soldiers and doctors during the Holocaust). This is a particularly challenging concern for law enforcement agencies when officers assert during investigations into their ethically questionable behavior that they were only doing what they were taught (or shown) to do in the academy or by a Field Training Officer (Bennett, 1984; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Ford, 2003; Haarr, 2001).

On a more frequent basis, officers may not feel ethically responsible when they are acting in ways that they believe are responsive to the community. For example, a direct consequence of community-oriented policing after asking community members to describe their enforcement priorities is that officers view themselves as simply “oiling the squeaky wheel.” When community members are encouraged to “say something when they see something,” a radio call is generated, which then provides the officers with the opportunity to displace responsibility for these enforcement activities onto community priorities. Such a situation gives officers the permission and apparent probable cause to secretly monitor or even arrest people who community members argue are “the criminal element.”

**Diffusion of responsibility:** Diffusion of responsibility allows individuals to diminish accountability by sharing blame with others. “People act more cruelly under group responsibility than when they hold themselves personally responsible for their actions” (Bandura, 1999). Police officers support each other during calls for service. There are times when a group of officers may engage in behavior that none of them would consider when alone. When confronted, they can “use the argument: ‘I only played such a small part that I am not really responsible’ or ‘Everybody does it’” (Loyens, 2014). Such situations may occur during officer involved shooting cases; as soon as one officer fires his/her weapon, other officers on the scene start shooting as well.

**Disregard or Distortion of consequences:** This emotional disengagement mechanism occurs when people fail to recognize the actual consequences of their behavior. “As long as the harmful results of one’s conduct are ignored, minimized, distorted, or disbelieved, there is little reason for self-censure to be activated” (Bandura, 1999). Disregarding or distorting consequences occurs routinely during noble cause corruption, whereby officers ignore or minimize their actions by focusing on ends rather than means. Many police officers simply do not recognize the seriousness of their unethical behaviors (Lobnikar & Mesko, 2015). For example, an illegal search may result in an otherwise legitimate arrest being thrown out. At the same time, when officers observe a lack of organizational response to misconduct (i.e., inadequate and inconsistent disciplinary procedures), they are likely to believe that there will be few, if any, consequences for their unethical actions.

**Dehumanization:** Dehumanization allows perpetrators of unethical behavior to disengage from “self-censure for cruel conduct…by stripping people of human qualities. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hope, and concerns but as subhuman objects” (Bandura, 1999). On a specific level, unethical acts may not result in any self-reprisal when officers refer to and, thus, perceive a crime suspect as less than human (e.g., “dirt bag,” “animal,”). On a broader level, which may be fostered and perpetuated by overt or implicit organizational messages, dehumanization occurs when police officers maintain an *us versus them* attitude about the public they are sworn to serve and protect (Detert et al., 2008). Officers regularly believe that people bring despair onto themselves and that problems such as addiction, homelessness, and alcoholism are the result of personal weakness. Also, officers may use derogatory epithets to refer to those residing in low income or crime-ridden areas of a city. Such demeaning terms can serve to alleviate the emotional distress police officers may feel when seeing and interacting with people living in such despairing conditions. Simultaneously, though, the dehumanization contributes to moral disengagement, which makes the commission of unethical behaviors more tolerable and more acceptable emotionally, rationally, and behaviorally.

Current budgetary limitations, which result in a lack of staffing and, potentially, equipment, also perpetuate the dehumanizing process. As a result of the rush that is imposed by a constant barrage of radio calls and the necessity to “clear” them, officers can become resentful of the repetitive calls to handle the same drunk, drug addict, or other subjects who comprise the bulk of their directed activity. Furthermore, the ongoing use of police and fire personnel as transportation to hospitals gets exasperating. Unfortunately, most departments cannot decline to provide service to chronic abusers of police service. It also is rather common among some officers to dehumanize these repeat individuals according to their condition or complaint.

**Attribution of blame:** Attribution of blame occurs when: “…people view themselves as faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation. Punitive conduct is, thus, seen as justifiable…Victims then get blamed for bringing suffering on themselves…By fixing blame on others or on circumstances, not only are one’s own injurious actions excusable, but one even can feel self-righteous in the process” (Bandura, 1999).

This is not a new concept or one that is unique to moral disengagement (Ryan, 1976). However, in conjunction with dehumanization, it helps to explain the attitude of many police officers who come to believe that people living in certain areas deserve whatever happens to them. Likewise, this construct explains why officers may adopt the notion that certain victims attract the victimization onto themselves. Such a perspective allows some police officers to feel faultless when committing unethical acts against certain groups of individuals.

Moral disengagement (and the specific mechanisms that comprise it) is a meaningful theory when attempting to understand police misconduct. The widespread extent of moral disengagement among police officers in general remains to be examined empirically (Loyens, 2014), but a strong argument can be made that current police training and police practices tend to foster this phenomenon. For example, it is pervasive among many officers, from the time that they are hired, through training, and well into their careers to be congratulated and characterized as “elite,” “the cream of the crop,” “special,” or being in the top 2% of those who applied. The mechanisms of moral disengagement may flourish when officers are reinforced and then continually propped up to believe that they are superior to members of the community.
The discussion of theoretical explanations for police misconduct has a few limitations. Although conclusions from many of the cited studies were based on empirical evidence, few of them included a law enforcement sample. Considerably more research should be done to empirically determine if the relationship between a given theory and unethical decision-making would be applied and generalized to police populations. Additionally, there is considerable conceptual overlap among many of the theories presented. They should not be viewed as distinct causal explanations for police officers’ unethical decision-making. Instead, these theories are presented to provide a broad view of possible explanations of the etiology and processes associated with police misconduct. It is quite likely that various factors lead police officers to make unethical decisions; also, there may be multiple factors involved in a single police officer’s misconduct. Therefore, such a wide-angle perspective is necessary in order to develop the most efficacious prevention and intervention strategies to cope with this complex issue in policing.

PREVENTION and INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

The various theories to explain unethical decision-making provide specific guidance to those who are interested in developing and implementing efforts to obviate police misconduct. Moreover, there is considerable overlap among amelioration strategies that would reverse or prevent the occurrence of police misconduct. Although the ultimate goal is to improve police officers’ ethical decision-making, the following sections focus on considerations from current literature. Police executives are encouraged to consider these best practices when developing and implementing policies and training curricula, so that they can achieve the greatest impact on their officers’ performance.

Hiring Efforts

As previously mentioned, recent research demonstrated that new law enforcement hires had higher than average self-reported integrity scores (Blumberg et al., 2016). Nevertheless, a more concerted effort to screen-out dishonest or unethical job applicants through direct integrity testing could be considered (Berry, Sackett, & Wiemann, 2007). It has been reported that there are over “40 published integrity tests, and at least 15-20 of these are in widespread use…” (Murphy, 2000). Interestingly, although these tests appear to be adequate in predicting job performance, at least in particular jobs, the mechanism for this has yet to be determined (Murphy & Dziewczynski, 2005).

Instead of focusing on integrity testing during the hiring process, and especially considering the results on the decline in integrity occurring one year post-academy training, hiring efforts should instead focus on other measurable traits. One approach is to take a screening-in orientation in which agencies only hire applicants whose background investigation can verify overtly practical examples of strong ethical decision-making and consistently high levels of integrity (Blumberg, Griffin, & Jones, 2014). Another approach is to focus on screening-out applicants who are prone to moral disengagement. Detert and colleagues (2008) specifically recommended to avoid hiring applicants who have been assessed “to be high on trait cynicism and chance locus of control orientation or low on moral identity and empathy….” Similarly, applicants who are determined through comprehensive background investigations to have displayed high levels of aggression during early adolescence may be more vulnerable to becoming morally disengaged (Paciello et al., 2008). Lastly, Moore and colleagues (2012) developed a brief instrument to assess applicants’ level of moral disengagement, which looks somewhat promising in its ability to predict job misbehavior.

The Role of Police Training

Out of necessity, and because of the relatively limited duration of most police academies, police training disproportionately focuses on the use of force, defensive tactics, and worst-case scenario problem-solving where physical survival is the primary consideration. However, prioritizing physical survival in police training can have a deleterious impact on new officers coming into the profession with a once balanced and healthy outlook of the world. For most new officers, preparing to work in dangerous, toxic, and life-threatening situations through academy and field training, which predisposes them to expect the worst, is in stark contrast with how they will spend most of their time on-duty. Unfortunately, the overemphasis on worst-case scenarios may mentally predispose officers to excessive suspiciousness and leave them expecting the worst from each member of the community they serve, which is a prescribed trajectory towards moral disengagement.

Although previous research has discussed the potential negative impact of training on police integrity, training both at the academy and post-academy (i.e. Advanced Officer Training) levels can focus specifically on efforts to prevent police misconduct. Initially, these efforts should focus on having police recruits and officers identify and solve complex moral dilemmas (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010; Sturm, 2015), which police officers will likely encounter on and off the job. To this end, it is imperative that training explicitly underscores the serious consequences that officers may face for violating ethical mandates (Lobnikar & Mesko, 2015). It is as essential for training to help officers mentally prepare for these on- and off-duty ethical dilemmas as it is to prepare them for any other job responsibility.

Police training should incorporate more case studies of officer misconduct and ethical breaches from within the officers’ agency. It becomes easy to defensively dismiss misconduct by officers from other agencies as the result of differences in agency standards or values. Discipline imposed for misconduct may also vary, allowing officers to distance themselves from the possibility of similar consequences from their own agency. Although there may be some challenges with releasing specific information about employee misconduct and subsequent discipline, the ability to learn from others’ behavior and consequences from within one’s agency can be invaluable.

Another component of police training should address aspects of moral disengagement. It is less likely for officers to behave unethically when us versus them attitudes are eliminated. One approach to achieve this is through “priming participants to feel connected through the thread of common morality” (Young & Durwin, 2013). This moral realism is seen as a mechanism to help people feel connected to even those who are quite dissimilar from...
oneself (Anderson & Papazoglou, 2014; Young & Durwin, 2013). Police officers can be trained to identify ways in which they may relate to others. For example, when interacting with a criminal suspect or a disrespectful community member, officers may find that they share an affinity for a sports team or listen to the same music. Likewise, when interacting with victims, training can help officers to “put a face to the pain” by humanizing them in an effort to maintain compassion. By emphasizing commonalities (e.g., “The same thing could have happened to my parents.”), training can help officers to improve empathy and to reduce cynicism (Anderson & Papazoglou, 2014; Creighton & Blumberg, 2016).

Emotional Intelligence

Although beyond the scope of the present paper, research on emotional intelligence has consistently shown that individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to make fewer unethical decisions (Krishnakumar & Rymph, 2012). Also, it appears that emotional intelligence can be improved through specific training programs (Nelis et al., 2011; Schutte, Malouff, & Thorsteinsson, 2013), including police training programs (Ebrahim Al Ali, Garner, & Magadlely, 2012). As Brunetto and colleagues (2012) stated: “It may be just as important for a modern day police officer to be emotionally aware as it is for them to be physically fit and knowledgeable about the law.” There is strong evidence that emotional intelligence training could help police officers in many ways, including, ultimately, to maintain a commitment to ethical decision-making. Such emotional intelligence training should not be limited to theoretical discussions, but can be infused in traditional training formats where officers process ethical dilemmas and engage in ethical decision-making. The inclusion of emotional intelligence objectives also can be seamlessly incorporated into existing tactical and operational field training, so that officers receive direct support to strengthen these skills.

Wellness Efforts

With increased empathy and lower cynicism, which are byproducts of less dehumanization, police officers run the risk of experiencing compassion fatigue (Battle, 2012; Papazoglou, 2017; Tehrani, 2012). Compassion fatigue can occur when helping professionals continually deal with traumatized people; the ongoing exposure to others’ emotional pain can lead to a variety of distressing symptoms (Anderson & Papazoglou, 2015; Papazoglou, 2017). For police officers, routine contact with victims of crimes, accidents, and natural and manmade disasters can take a long-term toll on their physical, emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. This makes it even more important for law enforcement agencies to emphasize officers’ wellness efforts.

With regard to ethical decision-making, initiatives for wellness and for integrity should be inseparable. It has been argued that unethical behavior fosters anxiety and depression (Baron, 2015), just as anxiety seems to increase unethical behavior (Kouchaki & Desai, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). Therefore, police executives motivated to create a culture of wellness are simultaneously addressing officers’ integrity. In addition to supporting projects to improve and maintain high levels of emotional intelligence, wellness efforts should provide resources for officers to develop effective and well-rounded stress management skills. They also can focus directly on bolstering officers’ future-self orientation (Hershfield et al., 2012). This can include retirement planning seminars, newsletters that contain a regular feature on retired officers’ activities and updates, and ongoing initiatives to improve officers’ health, fitness, and nutrition.

Wellness (and ethics, for that matter) needs to be treated as a perishable skill. Research on emotional intelligence (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016; Ebrahim Al Ali, Garner, & Magadlely, 2012; Nelis, et al., 2011; Smith, Profetto-McGrath, & Cummings, 2009) has demonstrated the inter-relationships among high emotional intelligence, stress/trauma management, and ethical decision-making. Therefore, wellness and efforts to increase and maintain emotional intelligence should be viewed as critical to police performance as other perishable skills, which receive ongoing mandated, in-service training and assessment at regular intervals throughout a law enforcement career, such as firearms, defensive tactics, and emergency vehicle operations. Police agencies should not wait until there is a problem in these areas to require “re-qualification.” Similarly, when it comes to wellness, law enforcement agencies can no longer afford to remain reactive and respond only after a significant incident occurs. Proactive, ongoing efforts to maintain officer wellness should constitute a critical component of a comprehensive program to combat police misconduct.

Community Relations & Community-Oriented Policing

When police organizations take proactive steps to have their officers engage members of the community in non-enforcement activities (e.g., participation in local charity fundraisers, attendance at various school functions, and involvement at street fairs and other community events), they show a commitment to eliminating the us versus them orientation among their officers as well as among community members. The impact of this from the moral disengagement literature is evident. In addition, these activities help to build mutual respect and trust between local police agencies and their communities. Through greater familiarity with all members of the community, police officers may begin to reduce their often unrealistically increased sense of dangerousness.

Likewise, a recommitment to community oriented policing may lead to greater ethical decision-making. Cooper (2012) believed that “police who regularly employ community or problem-oriented policing activities also engage less often in noble cause corruption.” For many reasons, including creating a sense of accountability to the community, this approach has police officers emphasizing their connectedness with the community, which makes it more difficult for the mechanisms of moral disengagement to flourish.

Oversight and Discipline

When one understands that numerous sources are responsible for police officers’ unethical decision-making, a logical conclusion to draw is that misconduct can never be totally eliminated. In fact, one could argue that it is a mistake for law enforcement executives to consider police misconduct as an anomaly. The job of police officer is very difficult and some mistakes, including certain unethical decisions, may be quite challenging for certain
officers to avoid making. It would be far more advantageous to reframe unethical decision-making on the part of police officers as a “normal” component of the job. This would help to destigmatize the behavior, bring it into the open, significantly reduce officers’ tendencies to cover for each other, and address it in an organizationally healthy and constructive manner. Analogous to committing a foul during a football game (e.g., Yellow and red cards), in this case, the offender is not shamed for the indiscretion. Rather than approaching it in an ephemeral, it will be ignored or tolerated. Quite the contrary, a crucial step towards preventing unethical behavior is to implement fair, consistent, and, even, strict intervention strategies. Porter and Warrender (2009) argued, “If punishment was harsher, or more likely, it may discourage officers to engage in deviant behavior.” There are realistic obstacles to implementation of harsher punishments for police misconduct. Current practices include unnecessarily long bureaucratic time delays for administering discipline. Police unions will need to cooperate, and collective bargaining agreements will have to be modified under the premise of collaboration in the workplace.

Beyond disciplinary interventions, law enforcement executives who accept the likelihood of police misconduct will encourage their agencies to develop a variety of interventions and preventative measures. Punch (2000) argued that this occurs through “aggressive investigative and promoting integrity.” Much of Punch’s (2000) focus recognized the need for agencies to destigmatize the problem, so that they can address the issue more proactively. “Alongside an Internal Affairs Unit, there should be a department responsible for coordinating the efforts to enhance integrity through education, publications, codes, seminars, role-play and simulations, posters, guest speakers, surveys, and the generation of positive news” (Punch, 2000).

Moreover, law enforcement organizations (including leadership in police unions) should consider including (or strengthening) categories of objective, observable evidence of ethical behavior on officers’ annual performance evaluations. Officers whose ratings fall short of these standards associated with positive incidents of ethical behavior would be targeted for early intervention efforts. It would be more efficient to address minor indiscretions before they reach the slippery slope where officers are at greater risk of committing more serious offenses. Law enforcement executives can do more to prevent a decline in police officers’ commitment to ethical principles if their goal is to curtail, rather than to eliminate, police misconduct.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the cause of police misconduct, theories that explain unethical decision-making provide preventative and intervention strategies. Rather than approaching it in an ephemeral fashion, the authors believe that law enforcement agencies should design and implement comprehensive programs and goal-oriented policies to combat police misconduct on an ongoing basis. Such programs and policies should incorporate the foundational theoretical framework of ethical decision-making in order to address and contain the various sources of misconduct in the police context. Finally, when one understands the myriad reasons why police officers make unethical decisions, a new narrative emerges in which police professionals will no longer focus on the “bad apples or bad barrels” ideology. Instead, police professionals will begin focusing on improving officer and organizational wellness and on finding ways to proactively maintain officers’ integrity.

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