

COMMENTARY

The socio-ecological model: A multifaced approach for I-O psychologists to design interventions targeted at reducing police violence

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Dhanani et al. (2022) highlight an array of domains within industrial and organizational psychology (I-O) that can be utilized to “fix the problem” of the disproportionate use of police force against communities of color. Two of the barriers to culture shift were mentioned and outlined in the focal article: the culture of silence that is pervasive within police culture and the police unions themselves that overlook destructive and harmful behavior that takes place within police forces. To mitigate police violence against Black communities, there need to be mass efforts placed on how I-O psychologists can work with police unions and how to actively work to shatter the culture of silence. Against this backdrop, for our commentary, we extend the conversation further by introducing the five-level socio-ecological model (SEM; Level, 2002), on which I-O psychologists can base recommendations to address the needed systemic and structural changes raised in the focal article. To make our case, we will first give a brief overview of SEM, the relevance of SEM to police violence, and end with how I-O psychologists can integrate SEM in their work.

Brief overview of SEM

SEM is a multilevel conceptual intervention framework widely utilized in public health and social-behavioral sciences that necessitates researchers, practitioners, and other key stakeholders to consider interventions as embedded in complex systems, and to examine contextual factors as moderators impacting intervention effects (Level, 2002). SEM recognizes that individual behaviors are a result of multiple influences from several overlapping levels in the environment rather than only a dichotomy of perspectives such as micro (individual level) or macro (organizational level; Ingram et al., 2021). Additionally, a narrow focus on macro and micro perspectives can cause researchers to lack a full understanding of the research question (Ingram et al., 2021). The framework typically includes 5 levels of influence namely: (1) intrapersonal (e.g. individual characteristics), (2) interpersonal (e.g. relationships with family), (3) organizational (e.g. law enforcement agencies), (4) environmental (e.g. cultural norms), and (5) policy (e.g. federal, state and local policy [see Figure 1]). Previous research has shown that SEM is effective in implementing transformative and sustainable programs and policy changes for various forms of violence, occupational disparities, and workplace diversity initiatives (Ingram et al., 2021).

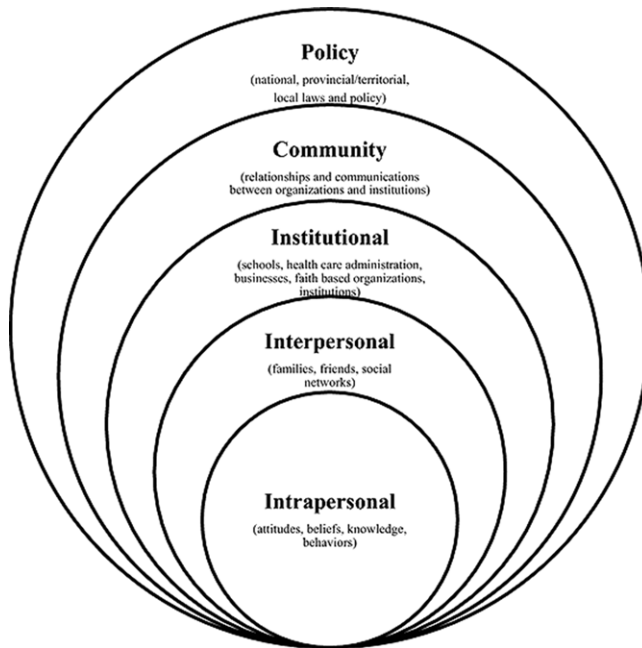


Figure 1. The Socio-Ecological Model.

Relevance of SEM to reducing police violence

The increased public awareness of police brutality against the Black community underscores the importance of SEM in moving beyond a microlevel focus on interventions (e.g., unconscious bias training) to include more of a social and political context that influences police officers' tendencies to commit acts of police violence. Recognizing the role of environmental factors such as organizational norms (e.g., a culture of silence) and policy in creating and perpetuating police brutality, SEM addresses both individual police officers' needs as well as integrates a systems approach that aims to dismantle deeply rooted systemic and structural racial barriers and inequities. Hence, the five overlapping levels of influence will serve as a blueprint for I-O psychologists when designing strategies and evidence-based recommendations that address police violence (Ingram et al., 2021; Level, 2002).

Integrating SEM within the role of I-O psychologists

Community/organizational-based participatory research (C/OBPR) allows key stakeholders, researchers, community advocates, and practitioners to have equal say in the entire research process. With the increase in social justice movements, C/OBPR allows communities most affected by police violence to have a seat at the table, thereby providing insight into key environmental influences that may be overlooked by I-O psychologists. Hence, C/OBPR answers the call for a more empowered approach to research that can drive change (Williams et al., 2022). For example, using CBPR, Urban Institute researchers collaborated with members of the Austin Justice Coalition and community members to reduce violence and drive police reform in Black communities most affected by police violence (Dwivedi & Weissman, 2017).

Furthermore, C/OBPR is particularly valuable as an approach to also help address the lack of diversity within the I-O field, which might cause even the most well-intended I-O psychologists to fall prey to their own similar biases or blind spots. This is because C/OBPR allows I-O psychologists to cultivate cultural humility (Collins et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2022). Specifically,

cultural humility provides I-O psychologists an opportunity to have an accurate outlook of their identity by critically examining their intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, education), impact on community research, power imbalances, as well as a lack of knowledge. For example, although I-O psychologists may know research design and intervention development for to reduce biases in law enforcement officials, members of the community may have alternative “ways of knowing” that can complement scientific evidence and can be included in intervention development and research (Collins et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2022).

Relationship building through advocacy

Advocates within the Black community have a close trusting relationship with community members as well as a long-standing history of tackling police violence. For many Black community members, there is a lack of trust when it comes to law enforcement (MacDonald & Stokes, 2006). This lack of trust may stem from a variety of reasons: The seemingly never-ending police violence against Black people may be a large contributor (MacDonald & Stokes, 2006). Within SEM community advocates can serve as equality ambassadors for both members of the Black community and police officers. As individuals who are proactive in advocating for change in policies and peace, they can work with I-O psychologists in improving police violence by working throughout the five levels of influence and implementing community partnerships and coalitions for community policing. For community advocates to be successful, law enforcement must work to rebuild this shattered trust within many Black communities. Community advocates must center the feelings, concerns, and desires of the most harmed. What will it take for community members to trust the police officers that were hired to protect and serve them? What specific actions must be taken for you to be protected and supported? Police departments must be working towards rebuilding and repairing community trust so that I-O psychologists and community advocates can work cohesively to create systemic shifts.

I-O psychologists can work with community advocates and organizations to identify change agents within both the Black community and police force who can address organizational and/or policy change. For example, a study conducted in 2018 by Rukus, Warner, and Zhang (2018) found that community policing had a positive impact on community participation in metro cities. It is important to note, however, that research indicates that in larger cities, police killings are fewer and far between compared to suburban and rural areas within the U.S. A wider array of interventions is needed for smaller and more rural areas, where research indicates that policing killings happen more frequently; however, a vast majority of the Black population lives in the largest U.S. cities, according to 2020 Census data, as cited by the Brookings Institute (Frey, 2021).

Addressing “I” through accountability, it is imperative to emphasize that no targeted action will be greater than accountability. Law enforcement must be held accountable, and I-O psychologists must work closely with police unions and government officials to develop accountability systems that will mitigate and deter harm. In order to rebuild and repair trust, these targeted actions must be accompanied by the adaptation of accountability systems. Accountability structures may involve docking pay, write-ups, and loss of work when officers engage in harmful behavior.

Conclusion

We believe that change within the U.S. policing system may be slow and difficult because of deeply rooted systemic and structural factors. However, through the collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts of I-O psychology, we believe that SEM can provide I-O psychologists with a framework to develop holistic interventions that address the immediate contributing systemic and structural factors of police violence. SEM provides an opportunity to build toward policy changes that are both transformative and sustainable. Ultimately, it is important that there is an emphasis on rebuilding and repairing community trust and developing accountability systems for harmful behaviors that disproportionately impact members of the Black community.

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