

Tangled up in Blue

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Conflict Management and Policing

Section E01

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Rosa Brooks is a tenured law professor who spent her earlier life traveling all over the world as a human rights activist and journalist. Now a minivan driving mom of two, she finds herself getting restless. Troubled by the ever-growing media depictions of police brutality, she impulsively finds herself wanting to be a police officer to see what it is really like. Coming from a far-left wing family of activists and being surrounded by anti-cop peers and colleagues, Brooks knew the people in her life would not react well to this. However, she did not let this stop her from doing what she felt she needed to do. In the spring of 2016, Rosa Brooks was accepted into the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department as a reserve officer.

In April of 2016 Rosa Brooks reported to reserve recruit class 2016-01. Determined to keep a low profile, Brooks vowed to herself that she would not act like her law professor, human rights activist self. Instead, she would keep her mouth shut and be a model recruit. On their first day of training reserve recruit class 2016-01 was informed they would be the first to be taught with the department's brand-new curriculum. There was no textbook or assigned reading material or handouts and it was soon revealed that this new curriculum was being written up week by week.

The class jumped from topic to topic, some topics being discussed more in depth than others. Brooks recalls the unit on uniforms and appearance, detailing the pressing of uniforms and how to properly polish boots being followed by a less comprehensive unit on ethics. (Brooks, 2021). Chokeholds are forbidden because the policy says so. Firearms instructors yell, not teach. The codes given over the radio on patrol are not taught, there is no list, you just have to learn it. There is only one unit on use-of-force polices and none on race because race does not matter. There was only a singular paragraph on theories of policing and no discussion about it or

effective policing (Brooks 2021). The primary lesson drilled into reserve recruit class 2016-01, anyone can kill you at any time.

Recruits watched “officer safety” video after video. I found this to be a little strange. I am not saying that officer safety is not important, of course it is, but are there not equally important topics that also deserve to be addressed and discussed? What about the safety of the citizens the police are supposed to protect or effective policing strategies? Why is it that when the whole country is discussing the controversies of the police, the police themselves are not? There was one instructor, Sergeant Flanagan, that took the time to touch on this issue. He emphasized that acting fast and acting stupid are not the same thing. You have to think and be smart about how you act (Brooks, 2021). If you are dumb you could end up killing an innocent kid (Brooks, 2021). There were also officers of course who taught essentially the exact opposite of this. Most of the teachers continuously drilled into recruit’s head’s phrases such as “you have a right to go home” or “there is no such thing as a routine call”. Yes, the whole country is watching a video of an officer shot an unarmed black man, but these teachers make sure you know that the wallet he was reaching for could just as easily been a gun.

Six months later, in October of 2016 reserve recruit class 2016-01 graduated from the police academy. New reserve officer Rosa Brooks was assigned to Washinton DC’s Seventh District, a very poor, predominately black neighborhood. Still trying to learn the different codes and struggling to understand dispatchers, Brooks felt clueless. She soon learned that she was far from alone in this cluelessness. In fact, she notes that many times the most experienced officers only had two or three years of experience. if even that. Officers would call one another on the phone because they could not remember proper procedures. Calls were unorganized, often times

with multiple officers unknowingly interviewing the same person, backup showing up when they were not requested and far too many officers tripping over one another, not sure of what to do. Not only is this just flat out ineffective, but overcrowded and unorganized crime scenes can even be dangerous (Brooks, 2021). With that being said, there was a lot more to patrolling than the underexperienced struggling to handle disorganized crime scenes.

While patrolling, Rosa Brooks quickly learned that the reality of policing was usually different than what the media portrays. For example, it is no secret that poor neighborhoods in the United States are overpoliced, however there is more to this than some people might think. In our nation's poor black neighborhoods, or at least in the Seventh District of Washington DC, over policing is due, at least in part, to the law of supply and demand (Brooks, 2021). In the Seventh District people are over reliant on the police, often calling for issues that should not require police involvement, but the police go to where they are called, even if it is just for a child leaving their bike in someone else's yard (Brooks, 2021).

In the spring of 2016, there was media outcry surrounding a high number of missing girls in Washington DC, most of which were black (Brooks, 2021). The media painted a picture that black girls in DC were disappearing and because they are black the police were not bothering to look for them (Brooks, 2021). This version of the story is not entirely accurate. Yes, there were missing girls and yes most of them were black, but most of them had not just vanished. According to Brooks most of these missing children left on their own accord and were either quickly located or soon returned home. It is not the children were kidnapped or had vanished without a trace; they just were not where they were supposed to be (Brooks, 2021).

Those who are privileged enough to not being living in middle class America see the statistics, but they do not really know what goes on in poor neighborhoods. They hear of missing black girls and assume they have been abducted or murdered and that the police just do not care. They hear about over policing and assume it is racism, but they likely have not even so much as driven through an area such as Washington DCs' Seventh District. They do not understand the human misery, generational poverty, and crime that occurs in poor black America.

Being constantly surrounded by the human misery in Washington DCs Seventh District, it is easy to develop a negative mindset, thinking everyone that turns the corner is just another criminal. Too many officers dehumanize, making cruel jokes and comments about the people they are supposed to serve, in an attempt to cope. Rosa Brooks saw this and decided to instead make a point to find the good within the misery. After all most of the people are just trying to get by. They are simply caught in poverty, working multiple jobs to try and provide for themselves and their families (Brooks, 2021). Over the course of the book Brooks encounters many people like this such as the son of an elderly won who passed, who just wanted a job to provide for his special needs son and his mother that never got to retire or a man who just wanted to be able to provide and be a good man so his son did not turn out like the rest of his family (Brooks, 2021).

During her time patrolling, Brooks further understood what she already knew, the world is complicated. Yes, the law of supply in demand does in part fuel over policing, but so does decades of laws and discrimination. The police see the joblessness, but do not understand the long costly commutes because the poor rely on public transportation (brooks 274). They do not see the decisions behind where public transport routes go which make these commutes so long and costly (Brooks, 2021). The police more often than not do not understand the decades and

decades of laws, polices and discrimination that has led to all of these things (Brooks, 2021). Yes, the children at the convenience store stole some food, but they were hungry and had no other way to feed themselves. Should they spend their lives in and out of jail because of petty theft to feed themselves? If they get caught more than once the chances are high, they will.

According to sources Rosa Brooks cites in the book, studies have shown that individuals who were in juvenile detention had a forty percent chance of being reincarnated by the time they were twenty-five (Brooks, 2021). Those numbers only increase for adults. Brooks list another study done by the department of justice that found that within three years of being released sixty-eight percent of prisoners found themselves reincarnated. When that time span was expanded to nine years the number grew to eighty-three percent.

The media has a tendency to focus its attention on the racist, power hungry, and neglectful cops when talking about all the above discussed topics. Yes, there are racist cops with bad intentions and power-hungry cops that are only in it for a badge and gone. Yes, there are cops that are neglectful with their duties and ones that enjoy giving out ticket after ticket or would have no problem arresting a child stealing just to feed themselves. Yes way too many of those officers do exist, but the majority of officers, at least in Brooks experience, were well intentioned (Brooks, 2021).

So, if most officers are well intended people why are so many people killed by the police? There was one encounter that Rosa Brooks recalled in the book that I believe helps shine some light on this. To summarize the story, early in her field training Brooks and her partner Jake were dispatched to an apartment complex. The occupant was out of town and the apartment was supposed to be unoccupied, however the alarm system had been set off. When they arrive the

front door is cracked, inside is dark and quite, suspecting a burglary they enter with their weapons drawn to the side. As they are moving further into the hall, light floods in as a door at the end of the hall opens (Brooks, 2021). A figure appears before letting out a yelp and disappearing again. This is when a situation can go right or very wrong.

If this were a training scenario, Brooks notes that bullets would have been flying at the dummy before the dummy could even disappear. After all this could be an armed burglar about to shoot, right? Only it was not an armed burglar, it was a kid. It was a kid who came over to his dad's apartment to do some laundry and take a shower and accidentally set off the alarm. Officer Brooks did not shoot, neither did her partner. They could have though. After all in their training they have been taught danger is around every corner, so it would not be surprising if one of them got scared and pulled the trigger. After all, they have the right to go home safe do they not?

Why is it though that police officers have a right to go home, but civilians do not? Yes, the figure coming out of the dark could have been a burglar, but it was not. Even if it was, what are the chances the burglar was armed and willing to shoot? The chances of that are low, likely even lower if they recognized it was the police. The truth is being a police officer is not as dangerous of a job as the vast majority of cops are likely led to believe. In fact, according to a statistic from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that Brooks cites in the book, it does not even make the top ten list of most dangerous jobs in America (Brooks, 2021). More surprisingly, taxi and limousine are twice as likely to be intentionally killed on the job (Brooks, 2021). To put it in a better perspective Brooks lists statistics directly from the MPD website. Between the time the book was published in 2021 and the founding of MPD in 1861 only sixty-nine officers were

intentionally killed (Brooks, 2021). In the past twenty years, only one officer was intentionally killed, and he was off duty and in another city (Brooks, 2021).

Yes, being a police officer is a riskier job than most average jobs in America, but as a police officer you sign up to take that risk. The mindset drilled into officers that they are always in danger and have a right to go home is exactly why the police kill so many people in America. Brooks suggest that instead police officers should be treated as soldiers are. Yes, you have a right to take reasonable precautions to protect yourself, but ultimately your duty is to protect the people you serve (Brooks, 2021). Will more police officers die in the line of duty if departments were to take this approach? Most likely yes, but the point Brooks is trying to make is that death is a risk you willingly take when you choose to become a police officer. Death, however, is not something a child showing at his dad's apartment should have to face.

The overall point Rosa Brooks is trying to get across with this book is that as a police officer your number one duty should be to protect and serve your community and that officer training should reflect that. Through her own personal experiences as well as statistics from numerous studies and sources, I believe Brooks conveyed her point well. Throughout this book, mostly in the training section, I found a lot of things shocking. Going into this book I was well aware of the fact that in most places in our country becoming a police officer is not exactly a long hard process. Afterall, I have friends that became an officer much quicker and much easier than my sister was able to get licensed to be a hairdresser. Reading all that the "training" entailed was still surprising. I figured that at a minimum more than a paragraph would be spent detailing different policing theories. I hoped that at least some discussion would occur on the experiences of minorities. I completely agree Rosa Brooks that these are topics that are extremely important

for officers to be educated on. In the ending of the book Brooks touches on a new program she is helping introduce to MPD which I believe is a great step forward.

After reading and reflecting on this book it is even clearer to me than before that the police as a whole need to make a much needed effort to build relationships with the community. According to the National Policing Institute, practicing Community Oriented Policing is the most effective way to build trust within the community. The Department of Justice has provided many tools that focus on community-based policing. One of the things that they recommend for building trust within diverse communities is to attend community events within those communities (Building). I agree that this is a great way to build relationships because it shows the community that you are interested in and care. The tools from the Department of Justice also detail cultural differences that police officers should educate themselves on. As an example, they detail the stigma around sexual assault in most immigrant Latino families and how they are less likely to report sexual assaults (Bouldin & Canday, 2016). Another resource also by the Department Justice, emphasis that it is important to recognize different minorities unique relationships with police officers, more specifically the historically negative relationship between black Americans and the police (Importance). This negative relationship is unsurprisingly a result of the long history of moralization and mistreatment of black Americans by the police.

Another group that has a long history of abuse and mistreat by police in America is the LGBTQ+ community (Bouldin & Canday, 2016). The main course of action recommend by the Department of Justice is education and understanding. In the previously mentioned resources, they detail some common myths and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ people as well as important information to be educated on (Bouldin & Canday, 2016). Finally, one of the most important

groups to be building relationships with is Americas youth. There are many ways this can be done such as school events, community workshops and mentorships (Bouldin & Canday, 2016).

In conclusion, moving forward I believe police should be educated on and focus on Community Based Policing. As a police officer your duty should be to protect and serve your community and recruit training should reflect that. The focus of police training should shift to recognize that while there are threats and dangers to police, most people are not looking to cause harm. Officers need to be educated about different policing techniques as well as experiences of minorities.

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