



COMMENTARY

# Racialized police violence: Potential solutions from and for Germany

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*Commentary on Dhanani et al., Reckoning with Racialized Police Violence: The Role of I-O Psychology*

We applaud Dhanani et al. (2022) for offering several excellent suggestions on how industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology could help address the problem of racialized police violence in the United States. With this commentary, we aim to add an international perspective to the discussion by describing how policing was reformed in Germany after World War II, as well as the problems Germany currently faces regarding racialized police violence. We offer five potential solutions for the United States based on Germany's experiences and three solutions for Germany based on established practices in the United States. The implementation of these solutions, many of which go beyond the focal article, could be spearheaded by I-O psychologists.

## Potential solutions from Germany

Under the Nazis, many German police officers helped carry out the regime's policies of persecution and mass murder. After World War II, the United States and its Allies fundamentally redesigned the police in West Germany to prevent its politicization and militarization (in communist East Germany, the state security or *Stasi* continued to oppress citizens until 1989). Today, Germany's police (*Polizei*), military, and domestic and foreign intelligence services are strictly separated, law enforcement is the decentralized responsibility of the 16 states and not the national government, and citizens' privacy is rigorously protected (*n.b.* these features have many advantages but are also a liability when it comes to addressing new challenges like terrorism). Although the history of the German police cannot be directly compared to the history of the police in the United States, Germany's experiences may offer some valuable lessons for future police reforms in the United States to reduce racialized police violence (see Bennhold & Eddy, 2020).

First, after passing a rigorous selection process, including cognitive and physical ability tests and personality assessments, future police officers in Germany receive at least two-and-a-half years of intensive training at a police academy, including classes in law, ethics, psychology, and police history, as well as lessons on Germany's democratic constitution (*n.b.* in the United States, courses at police academies rarely last longer than six months). I-O psychologists in the United States could help design similarly rigorous selection practices and intensive training curricula to prevent racialized police violence and promote ethical behavior. For instance, a recent

systematic review of police recruit training programs found that student-centered teaching approaches enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Belur et al., 2020).

Second, future police officers in several German states must visit a former concentration camp site to learn about the crimes committed by police officers under the Nazi regime. The union for Germany's federal police organizes two annual trips to the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem in Israel (Bennhold & Eddy, 2020). I-O psychologists in the United States could not only facilitate meetings between police officers and the beneficiaries of police work to improve officers' motivation and performance (see Grant, 2007), but also meetings between police officers and victims of racialized police violence to change officers' attitudes, foster understanding and prevent unethical behavior.

Third, police graduates in Germany receive civil servant status, which guarantees decent pay and job security, as well as high levels of trust, recognition, and respect by the public (*n.b.* the German police is still often described as *Dein Freund und Helfer*, or "your friend and helper," a controversial phrase that goes back to the Weimar Republic and was later popularized by Nazi police leader Heinrich Himmler). I-O psychologists in the United States could consult with policy makers to improve police officers' employment conditions and to design campaigns that enhance public trust, recognition, and respect (see Rudolph et al., 2021), which in turn may help prevent racialized police violence.

Fourth, based on ideas by the Allies to demilitarize and civilize the police in Germany, police officers do not handle minor infringements, such as parking tickets, noise disturbances, or illegal waste disposal. These issues are handled by uniformed but unarmed personnel of the municipal public order office (*Ordnungsamt*). I-O psychologists in the United States could conduct job analyses and potentially redesign jobs, such that armed police officers do not have to deal with minor infringements that could escalate and end up in racialized police violence. Indeed, some efforts to this end have already been initiated in the United States. For example, a police department in Colorado routinely pairs a police officer with a mental health professional to help deescalate calls that potentially involve a mental health crisis (Pegues, 2022).

Finally, the police in Germany holds a "monopoly on the legal use of force" (*Gewaltmonopol*) and, due to very strict gun laws, the vast majority of citizens are not allowed to carry guns in public—as opposed to the United States, where the Second Amendment to the Constitution protects "the right of the people to keep and bear arms." At the same time, police work in Germany is grounded in a general strategy of de-escalation and communication. A police officer drawing a gun, not to speak of shooting one, is an extremely rare event in Germany and often experienced as psychologically traumatic by officers. Accordingly, police officers in Germany face lower threat and a much lower number of people are killed by police officers as compared to the United States (e.g., police fatally shot 11 people in 2018 in Germany, whereas 1,098 people were killed by police in 2019 in the United States, which has a population four times that of Germany; Bennhold & Eddy, 2020). I-O psychologists in the United States could, together with professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, communicate evidence to policy makers on the detrimental consequences of citizens' widespread gun ownership for police officers on duty. At the same time, they need to keep in mind and help to overcome the major division between Americans regarding the Second Amendment.

### Potential solutions for Germany

Despite the significant changes made after World War II and the active culture of remembrance, the German police are not immune to racism and racialized violence (*n.b.*, the German police are often referred to as *Spiegelbild der Gesellschaft*, or "reflection of society"). In recent years, dozens of police officers have been suspended due to racist chat group and social media activity and links to neo-Nazi groups, and a number of migrants have died from excessive violence in police custody over the last few decades (Bartsch et al., 2020). In the wake of protests against racialized police violence in the United States, German police have also been increasingly criticized for the practice

of racial profiling, which has been denied by police authorities, police unions, and leading politicians. In stark contrast to polls conducted in the United States, a majority of Germans (63%) do not find racial profiling problematic and even believe it to be “necessary for effective police work” (69%; Haswell, 2017). German basic law (*Grundgesetz*) and international laws forbid racial discrimination, but it exists in society and in police practices, such as racial profiling, and has its roots in Germany’s history of colonialism (e.g., troops of the German Empire committed a genocide of the Herero, the Nama, and the San between 1904 and 1908 in German South West Africa, which today is Namibia) and more recent experiences with migration (e.g., “guest workers” from Southern Europe who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s; one million refugees, mostly from Syria, who arrived in 2015 and 2016; Baltés & Rudolph, 2010; Love, 2021). We suggest that there are three lessons that Germany could learn from policing in the United States to prevent racialized police violence.

First, compared to the United States, very little is known in Germany about the extent of racial profiling and racialized police violence. Due to its Nazi history, Germany’s institutions, including the police, do not routinely collect statistics on race and ethnicity. This makes it difficult to show that certain police activities, such as identity checks, vehicle inspections, personal and home searches, or violence differentially affect migrants and non-White Germans (Bruce-Jones, 2015). I-O psychology research conducted with police officers in Germany has focused on improving officers’ wellbeing, for instance through job design (Wolter et al., 2019) or mindfulness interventions (Krick & Felfe, 2020). I-O psychologists should also contribute their content and methodological expertise to designing and implementing in-depth studies and analyses on the prevalence and consequences of racial profiling and racialized police violence. The findings may help shed light on the extent of racial discrimination in the German police.

Second, specific and clear procedural guidelines that outline unacceptable and prescribe acceptable police conduct in interactions with migrants and, thus, help prevent racial profiling do not exist in Germany (Love, 2021). In the United States, for example, the SARA model (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment) is a common and effective approach to shared problem-solving in community policing (Weisburd et al., 2010). It entails the proactive and creative identification of recurring issues in the community and consultation with community members to determine the causes of the issues and to find long-term solutions. I-O psychologists in Germany could help design similar guidelines that enable police officers to decide whether a reasonable level of suspicion, based on people’s behavior and not their perceived ethnicity, skin color, or language, exists before checking or searching individuals. Without such guidelines, police officers may not even realize their unconscious biases and that their actions may constitute racial discrimination.

Finally, I-O psychologists could help empower police officers in Germany to take over a more active leadership role in preventing racial discrimination and violence. Following the example of the United States, the German police should be staffed with the help of I-O psychologists in a way that reflects the diverse communities they serve in terms of ethnicity, migration backgrounds, and languages (Gupta & Yang, 2016). Additionally, I-O psychologists could help the German police learn from the United States in terms of nondiscriminatory internal language use and external communication (i.e., public relations). For instance, in 2016 it became public that the police in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia had an internal practice of generally surveilling people of North African descent, which in internal communications and in public announcements over Twitter were derogatory called *Nafris*, or “North African repeat offenders” (Love, 2021). Police officers should also be trained regarding their communication with suspects about why they were stopped and searched. Improving communication, transparency, and ensuring accountability to legal protections provided by the law would further improve trust, mutual recognition, and respect between police officers and migrants and non-White Germans, and hopefully eliminate racialized discrimination and police violence.

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