

Bill C-42: A Police Psychologist's Perspective

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The ability to sanction oneself plays a central role in the regulation of inhumane conduct. As we traverse the socialization process we form moral standards that serve as guides and deterrents for our behavior. Once we have developed this system of internalized controls we regulate our actions by the sanctions we apply to ourselves.

The system has a weakness however; our moral standards do not run on automatic pilot. In order to be effective we must engage these self regulatory mechanisms. Unfortunately, there are several psychological processes that we can use to disengage our moral standards from our inhumane actions. The mechanism of moral disengagement that is the focus of this brief article is related to the process of blaming or dehumanizing the victims.

In certain instances, the possession of sweeping, unchecked institutional power can change the users in ways that are conducive to dehumanization. This is most often seen when those in authority, like the Commissioner of the RCMP and his senior managers and executives, have coercive power over others, like the membership of the RCMP, and when adequate safeguards for constraining that power are lacking. The power holders can come to devalue those over whom they have control. You may remember the famous psychological experiment where well socialized university students were randomly chosen to play the roles of either guards or inmates in a simulated prison experiment. After only a few days the experiment had to be aborted when the guards, who had been given unilateral power, began to treat their prisoners in tyrannical and degrading ways. It seems that a role assignment that authorizes the use of coercive power can override personal characteristics in promoting punitive conduct. A great deal of study of relative influences similarly suggests that social influences conducive to punitiveness exert a much greater sway over aggressive conduct than do people's personal characteristics.

All this to say, that Bill C-42 is not in line with contemporary organizational realities or with an effective, modern police service. The Bill will give the Commissioner of the RCMP increased and unchecked powers over the membership of the organization. With these powers he will perpetuate one of the major flaws in the culture of the organization; he will remain accountable to no one. Where are the avenues of redress for his, and his managers and executives, decisions? This sounds very much like coercive power over the membership without adequate constraints in place. This is a recipe for a labour relations disaster. I'm sure the Commissioner, the Minister of Public Safety, the senior executives of the RCMP, and much of the general public will be comfortable with Bill C-42. But we must remember not all RCMP members are Donald Ray or Monty Robinson! Many of them have genuine complaints, and no effective systems of organizational redress, that often result in "poor performance and absenteeism". There is a significant chance that these members will be summarily dismissed rather than offered due process.

The legion of harassed RCMP members and their abusers, that have created the drive behind C-42, are the responsibility of a failed labour relations program within the RCMP. The Division Staff Relations

Representatives program (DSRRP). This program has failed both the perpetrators and the victims; as well as the general membership that looks on in disgust. The DSRRP has been a dismal failure, is hopelessly compromised, and needs to be terminated.

I suggest that with the introduction of Bill C-42 the federal conservative government has fallen short. With increased power comes increased responsibility. The Commissioner remains responsible to no one for his decisions under this draconian labour legislation. If he is going to be given these sweeping powers, he must answer to someone. The contemporary realities of effective labour relations demand that along with Bill C-42 (in whatever form it takes) the RCMP membership be allowed to form an independent association that will create a collective bargaining agreement to hold the Commissioner to account.