Collective Memory and Whiteness in Organizations: How the Fraternal Order of Police Remembers Itself and the Occupation of Policing

Pamela A. Popielarz
Department of Sociology
University of Illinois Chicago

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ABSTRACT. Collective memory operates within various sites and communities. The field of organizational memory studies explains the dynamics of collective memory within and across organizations (Coraiola *et al* 2023). Among the outcomes of collective memory processes are conceptions of an organization's heritage, tradition, and collective identity. I put the organizational memory studies literature into conversation with the literature on racialized organizations to investigate how collective memory processes might contribute to the hegemonic Whiteness of many American organizations (Fritz & Lewis 2026). Relevant social mechanisms include various forms of remembering, representing, and forgetting the organization's past, which may be embedded into its formal structure or its informal culture. Remembrances and representations of the past – and elisions in them – help cement a picture of the organization's objective racial/ethnic demography but also aid in constructing subjective images of the ideal member, of revered leaders, and of people, events, and actions from the past that deserve recognition in the present. These mechanisms can help an organization propagate normative Whiteness from the past into the future through racialized schema and thereby legitimate the unequal distribution of resources across racial groups, constraining the agency of people of color, and perpetuating Whiteness as a credential (Ray 2019). I investigate these ideas in the context of an ongoing historical project on fraternal orders, focusing here on the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), which was founded in 1915 (Popielarz 2025; 2026). I utilize three sources of information: the *FOP Journal*, accessed through their online archive covering 2011 to the present; a history of the FOP published privately in 1977 and written by a historian linked to the organization; and an original 1918 ritual of the FOP. Findings highlight how the FOP congratulates itself for no longer being racially exclusionary, but that its practices of commemorating, preserving, and reminiscing telegraph a heritage of Whiteness.

Introduction

A multitude of institutions in the U.S. create and reproduce racial inequalities, including law, education, and the labor market. Law enforcement and policing have a long-standing place on this list, a fact that was amplified by the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black people at the hands of police. These events fed an ongoing "national movement against police brutality and daily police killings of unarmed African Americans" (Taylor 2016:2). Speaking broadly, calls for change in policing reflect different underlying views of the problem, indexed by questions about *what* policing does, *who* police are, and *how* police operate.

Some argue that *what* police departments do is the problem, namely that the institution of policing is fundamentally about the control of Black and Indigenous people, e.g., through its evolution from slave patrols and American military imperialism (Akbar 2020; Go 2020). Under this view, one prominent solution is abolition rather than reform.

Others argue that *who* police officers are is to blame. In other words, the demography of police departments and leadership does not sufficiently reflect the demography of the populations being policed. Proponents of this explanation often use the language of DEI and an implicit logic of ethnoracial matching (Abad 2019) to call for more racially diverse police hiring and promotion processes (Theobald & Haider-Markel 2009). Indeed, many police departments have significantly more members who are White, male, high-income, and Republican than the communities they serve (Ba *et al* 2024). Compared to their communities, police officers' attitudes are also "more racist, a pattern especially apparent among white male officers" (Roscigno & Prieto-Hodge 2021:1). But even racially diverse police departments are plagued by misconduct when the underlying networks of connections between officers remain racially segregated (Zhao 2026). More importantly, officer behavior, including use of deadly force, does

not differ strongly by race (Prieto-Hodge & Tomaskovic-Devey 2021). This call into question the usefulness of solely focusing on the reform of police hiring and promotion processes.

Finally, another argument centers on the dangerous impact of *how* police departments operate, from the training at police academies to the occupation's prevalent culture of violence (Sierra-Arévalo 2024; Simon 2024). From this point of view, reform efforts need to center on changing how police organizations operate, including both their formal policies and on-the-ground practices and culture. My version of this argument has its seeds in Victor Ray and his co-authors' assertion that

> "police departments should be thought of as 'racialized organizations' whose operation both reflect and reinforce widely held schemas about the proper place of people of color within organizations. … we hope to reframe studies of policing away from the notion that racial inequality is the result of a few bad actors, towards an understanding of race as being inextricably intertwined with the act, and organization, of policing itself." (Ray, Ortiz & Nash 2018:27)

My concern is how race, and specifically hegemonic Whiteness, is built into American police organizations through the reproduction of racialized schema. To further our understanding of policing and racial inequality, I articulate the racialized organizations perspective with other theories of organizations, including on collective organizational memory, and apply them in the context of a study of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP). This is part of an ongoing project about structural inequality and fraternal orders (Popielarz 2025; 2026).

In trying to understand police-related racial inequality, including the disproportionate use of deadly force by police against Blacks and other people of color, my perspective begins with the racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 2021). Racism is not an atavistic remnant of the past that

slowly but inevitably disappears with the passage of time. Racism is also not limited to overt versions. It can be colorblind, wrapped up in statements or policies that don't mention race, or aggressively deny racist implications, or even express a desire to be anti-racist. Colorblind racism is recognizable for its abstract liberalism and naturalization of racial segregation and inequality. Yet for my purposes the most consequential aspect of the racialized social system is that racial inequality originates in structures such as organizations and institutions, rather than just in the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Furthermore, in the contemporary U.S., the racialized social system operates by reproducing a hegemonic form of Whiteness. This hegemonic Whiteness is "a shifting configuration of practices and meanings … that successfully manage to occupy the empty space of 'normality' in our culture" (Lewis 2004:634). Thus, factors that bolster hegemonic Whiteness thus not only perpetuate racial inequality but also make it harder to recognize and explain it.

If racial inequality originates in structures such as organizations, then harnessing existing theories about how organizations work should be helpful. Yet for a century or more, organizational theory has been plagued by notions of organizations as neutral structures (Ray 2019). Acker's work on gendered organizations made a large measure of progress in one direction (1990). Despite calls for parallel theorizing about how race is built into organizations, which began during the same period and continued for years, responses were a long time in coming (Nkomo 1992; Wooten 2006). There were early scattered efforts to theorize Whiteness in organizations (Edwards 2008; Macalpine & Marsh 2005; Moore 2008; Ward 2008), but it took a few more years before fruitful theorizing about racialized organizations finally broke through (Ray 2019; Wooten 2019; Wooten & Couloute 2017).

Racialized organizations theory directs organizational theorists to "abandon the notion that organizational formations, hierarchies, and processes are race-neutral" (Ray 2019:46).[1] Organizations are racialized in the sense that race underlies "the logics that structure the everyday activities within and around organizations" (Wooten 2019:4). One way this happens is through racialized schema**,** which are symbolic representations of racialized groups that create inequality when they are linked with material resources (Ray 2019). In racialized organizations, racialized schemas are built into organizations' formal policies and informal cultures, which determine the distribution of resources. Racialized schemas are basic, taken-for-granted cognitive rules about *who*, in terms of race, should be treated *how* (Popielarz 2025; 2026). These help to legitimate the unequal distribution of resources across racial groups, constrain the agency of people of color, and perpetuate Whiteness as a credential (Ray 2019). Furthermore, organizational racialization is usually characterized by normative, hegemonic Whiteness (Fritz & Lewis 2026; Lewis 2004), and it spreads across organizational fields through White isomorphism (Garbes 2022).

In this paper, I put the literature on racialized organizations into conversation with other theories of organizations, including organizational institutionalism, organizational ecology, and historical organization studies, specifically organizational memory studies. My goal is to investigate how collective memory processes in the FOP contribute to a prevailing sense of Whiteness in American policing that endangers people of color and perpetuates racial inequality. I briefly introduce each theory in the section below, highlighting points of articulation, and then apply the result to the case of the FOP in the following section.

Theoretical Framework

Organizational institutionalism argues that the institutional and cultural context of an organization matters, including the organizational field within which the organization operates (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Greenwood *et al* 2017). Organizations are driven not (only) by efficiency concerns but also by prevailing conceptions of legitimacy within a field (Meyer & Rowan 1977). Conceptions of legitimacy rely in part on schema, which are "knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments under conditions of incomplete information" (DiMaggio 1997:269). Ray's theory of racialized organizations relies in part on organizational institutionalism, asserting that schemas are racialized and "can be thought of as a kind of unwritten rulebook explaining how to write rules," including about the distribution of resources to different racialized groups (Ray 2019:31).

To this link between racialized organizations theory and institutional theory, I add insight from one of the basic concepts in organizational ecology. Like institutional theory, organizational ecology emphasizes that context matters. In this case, however, it is the structural and competitive context of an organization that matters most. An organization's context includes other organizations connected to it through either formal network ties or co-location in geographic or social space (McPherson 1983). Specifically, organizations that overlap in membership have important effects on one another (Popielarz & McPherson 1995). In other words, the environment of any organization includes the other organizations to which its members belong.

The field of historical organization studies includes research on collective organizational memory (Maclean *et al* 2021). This body of theory explains the dynamics of collective memory within and across organizations, including in those organizations that anchor an occupation

(Foroughi *et al* 2020). Collective memory is a social construction of the past within an ecology of mnemonic communities. Occupations are transgenerational mnemonic communities whose legitimacy and professional status are maintained through various practices and technologies of memory (Coraiola *et al* 2026). Specifically, "individuals remember the past as members of specific communities that provide them with particular frameworks of remembrance (Halbwachs 1980)" (Coraiola *et al* 2023:375). An occupation's mnemonic community is largely contained in the organizations where people practicing this occupation work and hold power. This community helps to shape how an occupation's past is remembered, which in turn helps to define membership in and boundaries around the occupation (Foroughi, Eisenman & Parsley 2026).

Several categories of memory practices are relevant to racialized schema in organizations, including remembering and representing (Coraiola *et al* 2023). Remembering is accomplished through "practices used to preserve the integrity of the past against the inexorable force of forgetting" (Coraiola *et al* 2023:379). The main component of remembering that is relevant here is commemorating, which memorializes and celebrates factors from the past that must not be forgotten. The most salient aspect of representing in this study is historicizing, which is a practice "strategically used to advance the goals of the organization in the present by providing an authoritative version of the past" (Coraiola *et al* 2023:381). These memory practices shape membership, boundaries, and moral judgements in organizations and across occupations (Coraiola *et al* 2023; Foroughi, Eisenman & Parsley 2026; Suddaby *et al* 2023). Because collective memory and forgetting can silence the memories of less powerful groups of people, they are also often an exercise in "the reproduction of extant power relations" (Foroughi *et al* 2020:1735; Foroughi & Al-Amoudi 2020).

I propose that memory practices like commemorating and historicizing can reinforce racialized schema and thus valorize the normative practices that preserve an organization's racialized nature. Collective memory can thus help to propagate racialized schema that uphold normative hegemonic Whiteness in organizations from the past into the future.

Application to the Fraternal Order of Police

I am concerned with explaining how race, and specifically hegemonic Whiteness, is built into racialized schema in American police organizations. Scholars and observers of American policing recognize a prominent mode of thought among American police, a schema I call 'it's us versus them and they are a danger to us' (Popielarz 2025). This schema arguably has two versions, both carrying racial overtones that pit a White 'us' against a racially minoritized, often Black, 'them.' One version poses a sharp distinction between police/civilization and criminals/barbarism. Another delineates a tight circle of police and those who empathize with, understand, and actively support them, in contrast to everyone else (Fox 2025; Sierra-Arévalo 2021). In both versions of this schema the police face a dangerous opponent whose threat is not just symbolic or economic but physical and existential (Prieto-Hodge & Tomaskovic-Devey 2021). This schema is propagated in police academy training, where 'war stories' from senior officers and symbols and artifacts like memorial walls and tattoos teach recruits that "'everybody wants to murder you' and 'if you do not heed your training and plan for violence, you're gonna die'" (Sierra-Arévalo 2019:82). This schema conveys a message that police must be hyperaware of threats and ready to react immediately with violence if necessary. It also has clear implications for the distribution of resources by police, from symbolic resources such as respect for community members to material resources such as protection from crime and violence.

Police departments are frequent targets of research, and several scholars have argued that they are racialized (Gordon 2022; Nolan 2009; Prieto-Hodge & Tomaskovic-Devey 2021; Ray *et al* 2018). But policing is an institutional field that includes a plethora of organizations in the U.S. Police departments and agencies overlap with a variety of voluntary associations, including professional associations and labor unions, the FOP being the most prominent one. I argue that what happens in the FOP, including its memory practices, has consequences for the police departments its members work in. In other words, voluntary associations like the FOP may be receptacles for racialized schemas which continually replenish the racialized nature of the workplaces they overlap with. I show how one racialized schema is embedded into the FOP's collective memory of its own history and the history of policing in the U.S. I argue that patterns of collective memory in the FOP contribute to propagation of this racialized schema, which helps to preserve a sense of Whiteness in police organizations even though they are more racially diverse today than before.

The Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) is a voluntary association that was founded in 1915 by two police officers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As the term "fraternal order" in its name suggests, the FOP was originally organized as a ritual brotherhood. Fraternal orders were an extremely popular organizational form in the United States between the Civil War and World War I, a period sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of Fraternalism. Unlike general-interest fraternal orders like the Freemasons, Odd Fellows, or Knights of Pythias, some orders were industry- or occupation-specific, such as the farmers' Patrons of Husbandry (The Grange) and the lumber industry's Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo (Schmidt 1980). The FOP was originally similar to these. Though the FOP's activities are no longer centered on the practice of ritual, the organization does retain some important features of fraternal orders, such as local lodges being

federated under a national organization (Skocpol 2003). As I argue have argued elsewhere, the FOP was imprinted at its founding with many characteristics of the fraternal organizational form, including its close association with Whiteness (Popielarz 2025).

After more than a century in existence, today the FOP has nationwide stature and is the largest police association in the United States. It is a hybrid voluntary association; part fraternal order and part professional association for sworn officers from a multitude of police agencies. But it also functions as a labor union in some jurisdictions, although there are FOP lodges in states where police have no collective bargaining rights and police officers are represented by non-FOP police unions in several jurisdictions (Rad *et al* 2023). The FOP is thus "both a public-sector union and a conservative, mass-membership fraternal association" (Zoorob 2019:243). Nationally, the FOP currently has over 375,000 members in 2,000 active local lodges. Beyond its large size and scope, the FOP has wide-reaching impacts in politics and public policy. In addition to endorsing Donald Trump in 2016, 2020, and 2024, the FOP was linked to the White supremacist beliefs of many of his supporters and plays a prominent role in resisting police reform and oversight (Iosbaker 2023; Zoorob & Skocpol 2020).

Sources on the FOP

In this project, I critically analyze sources published by and for the FOP with the goal of understanding how this voluntary association is racialized through collective memory and thus how it might shore up racialized schema in the police agencies its members belong to. I searched for sources from different points in time during the lifespan of the FOP. Some were unfiltered accounts created at the FOP's founding, which allow me to construct a story going forward in time about racialized schema in the FOP. On the other hand, studying racialized schema in

collective organizational memory necessitated explicitly retrospective narratives from multiple points in time after the FOP's founding.

I found three appropriate sources. The first source was an original copy of the ritual used to initiate new members into the order (FOP 1918). The second source was a history of the order published privately in 1977 and reprinted in 2001 (Walsh 1977).[2] The author of this book was a historian employed by the publisher, who in turn was a friend of the FOP Grand Lodge president. The book's first six chapters covered founding and early years of the FOP. They included some quotes from founding-era FOP records, along with the author's summary of the organization's history from his vantage point in the 1970s. I also focused on the book's frontmatter. The original 1977 publication included a foreword by the Grand Lodge president, a publisher's foreword, a preface by the FOP's national counsel, and an introduction by the Grand Lodge president. The 2001 reprint also included a foreword by that year's Grand Lodge president. The third source was the magazine published by the FOP for its members, the *FOP Journal*. I accessed it through the FOP's online archive (https://www.fopconnect.com/fop-journal/past-issues/), which included quarterly issues from Winter 2011 through Winter 2020, and monthly issues from January 2021 through November 2026. As this project moves forward, I hope to add another official history of the order which was published recently and advertised in the *FOP Journal*.

Studies in collective organizational memory often find it useful to focus on core moments in an organization's existence: its founding, periods of change, and how it commemorates its own longevity (Maclean *et al* 2024). Studying periods of crisis is particularly useful for revealing power relations embedded in an organization (Rojas 2010). Thus, my basic analytic strategy was to first analyze documents from the founding of the FOP, including the ritual and passages from the original constitution and articles of incorporation that were quoted in the 1977 history. Next

in this paper, I focused on a period of instability (to put it mildly) in relations between police and the public: the post-Civil Rights period of the 1970s, accounts of which feature in the 1977 history. I am currently conducting analyses (not reported in this paper) of the post-George Floyd period of the 2020s, using issues of the *FOP Journal* from 2020 through the present.

Racialized Identity and Schema in the Early FOP

The FOP was founded by two police officers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They created an organization that reflected their identities as White men, although as I will show the FOP was male by rule, but White by practice. The FOP's identity reveals itself in the 1915 constitution and 1915 articles of incorporation registered in Pennsylvania, both quoted in the 1977 history of the order. The constitution stated the FOP's purpose as "bettering existing condition of Policemen" [*sic*] and "advancing Social, Benevolent and Educational undertakings among Policemen" (Walsh 1977:27). Regarding membership, it stipulated that "all Policemen are eligible for membership" and "Race, Creed or Color shall be no bar" (Walsh, 1977:27). The 1915 articles of incorporation further provided, "The membership of said corporation shall be limited to males, of the full age of 21 years, of good moral character and repute" (Walsh, 1977:37).[3] The 1918 ritual described how, after passing scrutiny for moral character, a new member's candidacy was voted on by all members using a blackball procedure (FOP Ritual 1918).

On its face, this evidence suggests that at its founding the FOP formally limited membership to men but was open to any male police officer, regardless of race. This is surprising given that many fraternal orders of the time were explicit in their exclusion of Blacks and other people of color (Popielarz 2026; Skocpol, Liazos & Ganz 2006). Several factors temper this apparent openness: the FOP was founded by White (mostly Irish) men, and it was many decades before Pittsburgh's police force included any Black officers. In addition, like most fraternal

orders, the FOP's early membership procedures included having to be nominated by a current member, having one's moral character investigated, and finally the blackball vote. These procedures effectively limited membership to men who resembled the founders but did so in a way that made segregation seem quite natural. These arrangements bear the hallmarks of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2021). The abstract liberalism of "Race, Creed or Color shall be no bar" (Walsh 1977:27) complemented the seemingly natural racial segregation that followed from relying on current members' networks and judgments to supply new members. Both were imprinted onto the FOP when its founders chose the fraternal form that was so exceedingly popular at the time. I call this pattern colorblind Whiteness and elsewhere show that it was practiced by Freemasons (Popielarz 2026).

Founding-era documents also reveal the presence of the racialized schema I label 'it's us versus them and they are a danger to us.' The 1918 ritual welcomed newly sworn-in members with instructions that used the racially loaded language of civilization and barbarism. In explaining the FOP's Latin motto '*Jus, Fidus, Libertatum*,'[4] members were told:

> Justice, my friends, is one of the greatest necessities of our Country, for without Justice our Country would no doubt be over-ridden with lawless men and eventually become barbarous. It is therefore the defenders of Justice we must thank for the state of civilization existing today. (FOP Ritual 1918:9)

This speech casts police as the bulwark against a dangerous threat to civilization and expresses anti-Blackness in the coded language of the time. Equating Blackness with barbarism had long been a strategy of justifying slavery (Kendi 2016). In the decades after Emancipation, scientific racism claimed a statistical link between Blackness and criminality (Muhammad 2019).

<u>The FOP's Racialized Identity and Schema in 1977</u>

The history of the FOP published in 1977 reflected a very different historical context than the founding documents above did. This context included the massive social changes that accompanied the civil rights and other movements between the 1950s and 1970s. Some police departments were becoming racially integrated and thus FOP membership was changing. This and other factors meant that the 1970s was a reactionary period for police and the FOP. For decades, police had been called on to stymie even legal, peaceful efforts by the civil rights movement to change the racial status quo in the U.S., and more recently it had faced off against the Black power movement (Rad *et al* 2023). Such encounters often led to violence, spurring widespread protests about police brutality and calls for civilian oversight of the police. These were mightily resisted within the occupation. Work conditions for police officers had changed in other ways, too, because of the *Miranda* and other Supreme Court decisions, which clarified the rights of accused persons and further standardized police procedure.

The 1977 history of the FOP asserted its interpretation of what was happening to the occupation of policing in this context. In doing so, it uses accounts of the past to bolster the reactionary stance of police toward their supposed adversaries. They in turn are described with a thin veil of racially neutral language, but are recognizable as stereotypical versions of Black movements, communities, and their allies. This strategic use of the past is an example of the memory practice of historicizing, and the content of it features the racialized schema 'it's us versus them and they are a danger to us.'

Like the FOP's ritual, the preface to its 1977 history dwelt on the opposition between civilization and barbarism, with the author remembering recent history with alarm and disgust. His grievances conveyed White resentment against Black civil rights advancements and fear over the advent of the Black power movement, claiming that despite being "the first line of defense in

the preservation of civilization," police were "under assault from every quarter" and subject to both a "civil rights assault" and "false charges of brutality and violations of civil rights" (Walsh 1977:ix). The author also cited parts of the federal government as opponents, including the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department, because they seemed "determined to destroy law enforcement while giving free reign to criminals" and made police "the prime target of groups who operate through poverty and welfare programs" (Walsh 1977:x). In the context of the 1970s, even without explicitly mentioning race, this language pointed to Black people and Black-identified social movements. As a result, "the individual officer's only defense is through the collective defense available through a Brotherhood such as the Fraternal Order of Police" (Walsh 1977:x). The FOP was thus posed as shielding police from potent—and violent—enemies.

The author's strategically constructed narrative, or process of historicizing, continued with his recounting of the origins of policing and the FOP. These passages further telegraphed colorblind White identity and the racialized schema of 'us vs. them.' The author of the FOP history invoked popular conceptions of civilization as European in origin and highlighted the nineteenth century British origin of policing. Thus, "a policeman in the tradition of Western Civilization is a citizen who guards the city and thereby makes possible the process of civilized life" (Walsh 1977:4). He posed the first American police departments as originating in the mid-nineteenth century because of hindrances to civilized life, such as "older Americans' fear of newly arrived immigrants" and "increasing racial tensions growing out of the agitation over slavery" (Walsh 1977:8). From this, "the result was clear—American cities were becoming ungovernable without disciplined local police power" (Walsh 1977:8). The author further invoked Sir Robert Peele—founder of the London Police, sometimes described as the father of modern policing—and concluded that "quite clearly, the Fraternal Order of Police, [is] an

American organization of policemen developing out of the Anglo-American tradition of limited power and individual liberty" (Walsh 1977:6). Thus, the 1977 history of the FOP stewarded its White identity and racialized schema, even though it was no longer an all-White organization.

Conclusion

This preliminary research on the Fraternal Order of Police aimed to investigate its racialized nature, including its association with hegemonic Whiteness and the racialized schema reproduced within it. To do this work, I combined racialized organizations theory with insights from the study of collective organizational memory. Empirically, I was able to demonstrate that at its founding the FOP was characterized by colorblind Whiteness and was suffused with a racialized schema of 'it's us versus them and they are a danger to us.' I then showed how in the 1977 history of the FOP this schema was reproduced through practices of historicizing that posed policing as a White occupation and Blacks and other people of color as dangerous adversaries. Research in progress brings this analysis to the present by studying memory practices and racialized schema in the *FOP Journal* issues from 2020 to the present.

The FOP is important on its own, in terms of its political impact and its strong opposition to police reform and oversight (Serwer 2021). But I argue that the FOP is particularly consequential because of its ecological overlap with police departments and agencies across the nation. When the FOP's memory practices keep the flame of racialized schema alive, they also burn in the departments and agencies where its members work. This is one way that the institution of policing reproduces structural racial inequality. Overall, I argue that White supremacy does not only reside in ideology and individual behavior, it is durably ensconced in organizations that are racialized not just in terms of *what* they do, or *who* belongs to them, but *how* they operate.

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[1] Ray also calls on scholars of race/ethnicity to focus on organizations in addition to their frequent targets of inquiry, namely individuals, ideologies, and the state (Ray 2019).
[2] I bought these two rare books from a used book website.
[3] Later revisions lowered the age of membership to 18 and did away with the male requirement.
[4] FOP founder Delbert Nagle coined this motto, thinking it meant “Fairness, Justice, Equality.” In fact, it is nearly untranslatable but was later rendered as “Law is a Safeguard of Freedom” (Walsh 1977:18, 20).