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## Why are young adults willing to cooperate with the police and comply with traffic laws? *Examining the role of attitudes toward the police and law, perceived deterrence and personal morality*



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## ABSTRACT

The question why people are willing to comply with the law and to cooperate with the police has received more attention the past several years. According to the procedural justice model this is caused by the fact that when civilians trust the police to treat them honestly and fairly, they will perceive the police as a legitimate institution that deserves respect and obedience. The perception that the police is legitimate is necessary so the police can enforce authority and civilians will be willing to comply with the law and to cooperate with the police. This study attempts to test an expanded version of the procedural justice model. The added value of this study is, firstly, that it takes into account several intermediary mechanisms that might influence the relations between perceptions about the procedural justice and effectiveness of the police, and the compliance with the law and the willingness to cooperate with the police. More specifically, the perceived legitimacy of the law and legal cynicism are added as intermediary variables to the model. Secondly the model is adapted for compliance with traffic laws. Two alternative paths are examined more closely as well, this way we verify what role perceived deterrence and personal morality play in the explanation of the willingness of young adults to comply with traffic laws and cooperate with the police. The test was executed according to path models with the aid of a large-scale student survey (N = 1659). On the one hand, the results show that procedural justice has an effect on the result variables through several pathways, i.e. through the perceived legitimacy of the police, the perceived legitimacy of the law and legal cynicism. On the other hand, the explanatory power of the model is limited. We wish to nuance the results by formulating several critical remarks.

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## 1. Introduction and problem definition

Different studies have shown that the willingness of civilians to cooperate with the police on the one hand and to comply with the law on the other hand significantly depends on the extent to which civilians see the police as legitimate (Hough et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2012a; Tyler, 1997; Van Damme, 2013). Perceptions about the legitimacy of the police are in turn influenced by the trust civilians place in police functioning. According to the procedural justice model (Thibaut and Walker, 1975; Tyler, 1988, 2006, 2007, 2011) this trust is a result of *perceptions about the procedural justice* of the police and, to a lesser extent, of *perceptions about the effectiveness* of the police. For civilians being treated honest and respectful by the police seems to be more important than the objective results of their interventions (Hough et al., 2010).

Round 5 of the European Social Survey (ESS, 2010),<sup>1</sup> which included a specific module concerning trust in the police and courts, has contributed significantly to the research concerning the role of procedural justice. This dataset has made it possible to test the procedural justice model in several European countries. Hereby remedying one of the criticisms of the theoretical model. This criticism said the procedural justice model was primarily tested in Anglo-Saxon countries and might not be applicable for other contexts (Hough et al., 2010). After all, both the legal system and the position of the police can vary immensely between countries, but both want to be legitimate in all countries. But there still remain a few limitations in the research about the influence of perceptions about procedural justice on the willingness to cooperate with the police and the compliance with the law. E.g. research mainly focused on adult populations.<sup>2</sup> The question arises if the procedural justice model counts for non-adult populations as well, e.g. a student population. This question is relevant because the crime-age curve shows more rule-violating behaviour occurs among young adults than among older adults. As a result contact with the police can influence perceptions about police functioning. There have been studies that prove that youths think less positive about the police than adults (Bral, 2008; Brown and Benedict, 2002; Taylor et al., 2001). A second limitation is that there barely has been research about the possible interfering mechanisms. While the ESS makes it possible to test the core assumptions of the procedural justice model, attention has been spent to only one intermediary variable, i.e. the role of the perceived legitimacy of the police.

With this study we hope to contribute to the small amount of research on attitudes among youths/young adults about the police and the law (e.g. Nivette et al., 2015; Reisig et al., 2012, 2014). Specifically we report the results of a test of the core assumptions of the procedural justice model on a student population (+18 y.) in the Belgian context. The testable path model is based on the theoretical assumptions tested by Tyler (2006), Hough et al. (2010) and Jackson et al. (2012a). The model contains multiple intermediary social mechanisms that were not included in round 5 of the ESS because of the limited

<sup>1</sup> The ESS maps behaviours, values and opinions of the inhabitants of more than 20 European countries and shows how they develop. The ESS is known to be one of the most qualitative surveys in which a lot of effort is put into keeping the respondent grades high and guaranteeing the trustworthiness and validity of the measuring instrument.

<sup>2</sup> The ESS dealt with a more general population, namely above 14 years old.

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