In the eyes of the law: Associations among fear of negative evaluation, race, and feelings of safety in the presence of police officers

Amanda M. Clevinger*, Heather M. Kleider-Offutt, Erin B. Tone

Georgia State University, Department of Psychology, P.O. Box 5010, Atlanta, GA 30302, United States of America

A B S T R A C T

Police officers are a community resource tasked with keeping citizens safe. Some individuals, however, particularly those from groups that have historically experienced mistreatment at the hands of police officers, are disproportionately likely to perceive interactions with police, even those that are ostensibly benign or helpful, as threatening. We know little about whether psychological characteristics, such as fear of negative evaluation (FNE), which is also associated with heightened perception of threats from others, may amplify or attenuate perceptions of safety in the presence of the police. We used linear multiple regression to test the hypothesis that perceptions of safety in the presence of same- and different- race police officers would be lower among members of a group with heightened perceptions of police mistreatment (African Americans), particularly those who also endorse high levels of FNE, than among European Americans, regardless of their levels of FNE. Our findings indicate that the interaction between participant race and FNE significantly predicted safety feelings in the presence of police officers, particularly those from a racial outgroup. How one views interactions with police may influence whether or how often a citizen seeks police protection as well as the nature of those interactions.

1. Introduction

Optimally, the presence of police should serve as a safety signal, and it does so for many people (Rowland & Coupe, 2014). However, for many others, the presence of police instead signals danger or threat (e.g., Najdowski, Bottoms, & Goff, 2015; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997). One characteristic that may contribute to perceptions of police as safe versus dangerous is pervasive fear of negative evaluation (FNE) from others, both during and in anticipation of interpersonal interactions. For people with this kind of fear, which is a core feature of social anxiety (Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008), the presence of police, whose negative evaluation could lead to strikingly aversive consequences, may serve as a potent danger signal.

In the United States, an association between police interaction and feelings of threat or danger may also be particularly strong for those who identify as Black or African American, as they belong to a group that has historically experienced mistreatment at the hands of public safety officers (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Multiple cases in which police have mistreated Black/African American men have received intense media attention in the past several decades (Liu & Crank, 2010), and new cases of officers using excessive force with or shooting unarmed Black/African American men continue to be documented regularly (The Guardian, 2018).

Because they often receive national publicity, these cases may foster or amplify negative views of the police and may bias estimates of the frequency with which police brutality against minority members occurs, not only in the area where the misconduct occurred, but also across the nation, especially among members of minority groups (Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). It is thus not surprising that research consistently finds more negative attitudes, including fear, toward the police among adults who identify as Black/African American than among those who identify as European American (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005; Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008). Furthermore, Black/African American individuals may feel especially threatened in the presence of European American officers, given the long history in the United States of discriminatory behavior toward and miscarriages of justice for Black/African American people (Walker, 1980).

For individuals who both identify as a member of a historically mistreated minority group and experience general FNE, encounters with the police may be particularly distressing and problematic. This possibility is of concern, given that heightened FNE is associated with patterns of behavior including gaze aversion and avoidance of eye contact, as well as fidgeting and tensing one's muscles, that are also commonly believed to signal deception (e.g., Langer & Rodebaugh, 2013; Terburg, Aarts, & van Honk, 2012; Terburg et al., 2016; Walters

& Inderbitzen, 1998; Weeks, Howell, & Goldin, 2013; Weeks, Rodebaugh, Heimberg, Norton, & Jakatdar, 2009; Zimmerman, Morrison, & Heimberg, 2015). Indeed, some police training programs explicitly teach officers to interpret such nonverbal cues (avoidance or breaking of eye contact, fidgeting, etc.) as signals that a person is lying or feeling guilty (Bond & DePaulo, 2008; Vrij & Mann, 2001).

Experiencing FNE may create disproportionate anxiety in the presence of consequential evaluators, such as police officers; this distress, in turn, could precipitate nonverbal behaviors that officers are likely to misinterpret as suspicious. Individuals who fear negative evaluation may therefore be at particularly heightened risk for police misjudgment or maltreatment, especially if they are also members of a group that is stereotyped as dangerous. Consequently, members of stereotyped minority groups who also experience high FNE may be especially prone to feel unsafe in the presence of police.

To date, there appears to be no published research that examines how FNE relates to perceptions of safety around police officers, nor whether and how self-identified racial group membership may moderate such associations. These are important questions to ask, as findings of significant associations could underscore the importance of enhancing police training about anxiety and its manifestations, particularly in members of vulnerable groups. The present study thus constitutes a first step toward understanding how self-identified racial group membership and psychological characteristics, such as FNE, may interact to predict perceptions of the police as symbols of safety or danger.

1.1. Hypotheses

In the current study we examined associations among college students' FNE, race, and feelings of safety in the presence of police officers. We asked about perceived safety with police in general, as well as with officers of the same race as and other races than the participant. We predicted that FNE would be negatively associated with feelings of safety in the presence of police officers generally, but that race would moderate this association, such that it would be stronger in African American participants than in European American participants. Further, we predicted that the strongest negative associations between FNE and feelings of safety would emerge for African American individuals when police officers were of a different race from them.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

We analyzed data from 224 undergraduate college students aged 18 to 48 years (M = 21.23, SD = 3.97) who were attending an urban public university in the southeastern United States. Of participants, 76.8% identified as female, 21% as male, and 2.2% as transgender or other. Participants whose data were included in the current analyses identified as either Black/African American (50%; of these participants, 83% were women) or White/European American (50%; of these participants 68% were women).

2.2. Procedures

Students enrolled in introductory psychology classes were invited to participate in a survey study of healthy relationships among college students through a recruitment statement presented via an online research participant pool management program. Participants read an online consent form approved by the university's Institutional Review Board before proceeding to the survey, which implied their consent for the researchers to use their data.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Demographics

As part of the survey, which comprised a broad range of measures, most of which were not relevant to the current analyses (full list available upon request), participants provided demographic data, including age, race, and gender.

2.3.2. Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale—Brief version (FNE-B; Leary, 1983)

On this 12-item self-report measure, respondents rated the degree to which statements regarding evaluative concern (e.g., "I am afraid others will not approve of me.") applied to them, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all characteristic of me; 5 = extremely characteristic of me). Responses, some reverse-scored, are summed to yield a total score. The FNE-B has been found to be reliable and valid for use with both undergraduate samples (Leary, 1983) and clinically anxious samples (Collins, Westra, Dozois, & Stewart, 2005). It has also been shown to function comparably in members of different racial groups (Norton & Weeks, 2009). In the present sample, reliability was excellent (alpha = 0.89). Total FNE-B score was a predictor variable in all analyses.

2.3.3. International Positive and Negative Affect Scale—Short Form (I-PANAS-SF; Thompson, 2007)

This 10-item measure of trait positive and negative affect requires respondents to rate the degree to which they typically experience a variety of affective states, half of which are positive (e.g., inspired), and half of which are negative (e.g., upset) in valence. Responses for each type of affect are summed to yield positive and negative subscale scores. Thompson (2007) found evidence that the measure is reliable and shows acceptable levels of construct and convergent validity. For the present sample, we obtained evidence of good reliability for both the negative affect scale (alpha = 0.80) and the positive affect scale (alpha = 0.77). The I-PANAS-SF Negative Affect scale score, which broadly taps negative emotionality, or the propensity to experience negative states, including general anxiety and depression (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), served as a covariate in analyses.

2.3.4. Safety in the presence of police

Participants rated their feelings of safety in the presence of police officers in general ("How safe do you feel in the presence of police officers in general?"), as well as those of their own race ("How safe do you feel in the presence of police officers who are of your own race?") and those of other races ("How safe do you feel in the presence of police officers who are different from your own race?"), using a 5 point scale that ranged from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). Four participants declined to respond to the question regarding safety in the presence of other-race police officers, and two participants declined the question regarding safety in the presence of same-race police.

2.4. Statistical approach

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three multiple regression analyses predicting self-rated safety in the presence of police from participant race (dummy coded: Black/African American = 0, White/European American = 1), mean-centered FNE-B total score, and the interaction of the two variables. Feelings of safety around police officers in general served as the dependent variable in the first model, feelings of safety around same-race police officers served as the dependent variable in the second model, and feelings of safety around other-race police served as the dependent variable in the third model. Total I-PANAS-SF Negative Affect score was entered at the first step of each model as a covariate, to take into account the possibility that low ratings of safety might exclusively or primarily reflect a general tendency to experience negative emotion more broadly, rather than FNE