Variable links within perceived police legitimacy?: Fairness and effectiveness across races and places

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ABSTRACT

This work examines connections between two threads of community residents' perceptions of local police legitimacy, effectiveness and procedural fairness, and how those links depend on race, place, and race/place combinations. Previous works have connected these two threads, but have failed (a) to explore the variability of that connection by race, place, and race/place combinations across communities spanning the urban to suburban to rural continuum or (b) to model mutual influence. An extension of the group position thesis and work on minority views of police practices suggest how these variations might be patterned. Data were derived from a 2003 probability-based sampling survey of household respondents across Pennsylvania ($n = 1289$). Generalized confirmatory factor analysis models built procedural fairness and effectiveness indices for four groups: whites in urban core counties, non-whites in urban core counties, whites in non-urban core counties, and non-whites in non-urban core counties. Non-recursive structural equation models revealed variable impacts of perceived police effectiveness on perceived police fairness and, to a lesser extent, of fairness on effectiveness. Implications for a more structurally and contextually aware understanding of links in police legitimacy models are developed.

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1. Introduction

People's perceptions of their local police prove both practically important and theoretically complex. On the practical side, views link to behaviors such as willingness to report crime or criminals to police, willingness to obey or cooperate with the police, or to serve as witnesses in criminal justice procedures; and attitudes such as maintaining confidence not only in police agencies and actions, but also in agents throughout the broader criminal justice system (Kochel, 2011; Kochel et al., 2013; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tankebe, 2008, 2009, 2013; Taylor and Lawton, 2012; Tyler, 1990; Tyler and Fagan, 2008). That work, particularly questions about the net impacts of perceptions of agencies acting in procedurally fair ways, is not without controversy (Taylor and Lawton, 2012: 417). On the theoretical side, citizens' views of local police contain numerous threads. These include, for example, residents' satisfaction with police generally, their satisfaction or lack thereof arising from specific encounters, and their perceptions of police effectiveness and procedural fairness. The dynamics behind the personal, experiential, and contextual factors that shape these views also have proven complex and multi-threaded. The literature is clear that

both race/ethnicity and contextual factors shape these perceptions (MacDonald et al., 2007; Schuck et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2009). Whites and nonwhites perceive that they are policed differently, even in places where minorities are few in number (Stewart et al., 2009). Regarding location, in addition to community racial composition (Smith, 1986; Stewart et al., 2009) urban vs. non-urban context shapes perceptions as well (Boggs, 1971; Taylor and Lawton, 2012).

The current investigation seeks to extend the work in this area in the following ways. First, the recent repositioning of procedural justice dynamics into a broader legitimacy frame (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012) has highlighted the simultaneous relevance of and connections between perceived procedural fairness and perceived effectiveness of local police (Tankebe, 2013; Jackson et al., 2012). In different works that relationship has been modeled in different ways, but no work to date has argued for or examined the possibility of mutual influences. Building on previous works, arguments are developed for *both* impacts of effectiveness on fairness and of fairness on effectiveness. Second, the current work examines whether those links might depend on race, place, and *simultaneously* on race and place. A further extension of the group position thesis, already elaborated by Weitzer and Tuch (2005a), and recent qualitative work with urban nonwhite adolescents in high violent crime neighborhoods (Carr et al., 2007) suggest specific predictions about these connections. These arguments also have implications for the patterning of mean perceived effectiveness and fairness across race/place combinations. These average differences are considered as well.

1.1. Factors shaping views of local police

Research underscores the crucial and intertwined roles that race and community context play in forming citizens' views of the police (Brunson and Miller, 2006; Carr et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2009; Taylor and Lawton, 2012).[1] Aggressive policing in low income, minority urban neighborhoods can lead to direct and retold negative experiences (or highly publicized events) with police and especially among young black males. For the latter, these often lead to consistent negative appraisals of the police (Brunson, 2007; Weitzer, 2002). Even among black adolescents, community racial composition, and changes such as increasing black population in white neighborhoods, shape reported experiences of discriminatory police practices (Stewart et al., 2009). In addition, in urban settings more broadly, how individuals feel about their treatment during their face-to-face police encounters similarly shapes their police appraisals (Brunson and Miller, 2006; Carr et al., 2007; Fagan and Davies, 2000; Tyler, 2005). Urban individuals perceiving procedurally unfair treatment – believing they have been stopped without cause, been treated rudely, or not been listened to – are less satisfied with police and view them as less legitimate (Brunson and Miller, 2006). Of course, local police functioning and organization vary across rural, suburban, and rural contexts; so too do residents' perceptions of and expectations about police (Cordner and Scarborough, 1997; Garcia and Cao, 2005; Taylor and Lawton, 2012). Work to date, however, has not considered how connections between different threads of resident's police views might depend on such a broader context.

Despite a negative disposition toward police based on "lived experience of negative interactions," many urban residents still view the police as playing a "vital role for them in crime-reduction efforts" (Carr et al., 2007: 469; see also Brunson and Miller, 2006). Since police are held somewhat responsible for crime levels, it is not surprising that many residents of urban and high crime neighborhoods see local police as ineffective and report less satisfaction with them (Reisig and Parks, 2000; Weitzer and Tuch, 2005b). Broadly then, citizens' views of the police reflect who is policed, how they are policed, surrounding levels of crime and disorder, and where they are policed, that is, the neighborhood and city contexts and the racial changes taking place there (Brown and Benedict, 2002; Brunson and Miller, 2006; Cao, 2011; Schuck et al., 2008; Sharp and Johnson, 2009; Stewart et al., 2009; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990; Taylor et al., 2010; Taylor and Lawton, 2012; Tyler and Huo, 2002).

1.2. Two themes: Perceived procedural justice/fairness and perceived effectiveness

Getting more specific about citizens' views of local law enforcement and, separate from broader assessments like overall satisfaction or confidence, two themes have emerged as important: perceived fairness of citizens' treatment at the hands of local police, and perceived effectiveness of local law enforcement. These two threads connect to broader views, to some contextual conditions, and also to one another.

Considering the broader views first, satisfaction with police contact has been linked to perceived fairness and crime prevention effectiveness (Huang and Vaughn, 1996). Further, less legitimacy is accorded to police by those perceiving police delivering procedurally unfair treatment (Brunson and Miller, 2006; Hinds and Murphy, 2007; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990; Tyler and Huo, 2002). Perceived procedural justice also enhances confidence in local police which, in turn, enhances confidence in the broader criminal justice system (Taylor and Lawton, 2012). Alternatively, if police are perceived as treating people in one's neighborhood unfairly, then police may be viewed as less effective in their ability to reduce crime since the police are going to get less cooperation and intelligence from the public.

Context proves important for perceived ability of the police to control crime (Weitzer and Tuch, 2005b; Sun et al., 2013). As an example of contextual influences, residents living in high crime urban neighborhoods view the police as less effective

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[1] Of course, numerous additional personal and contextual features also affect views about local police (Brown and Benedict, 2002). Context features at both the city and neighborhood level prove relevant (Schuck et al., 2008; Sharp and Johnson, 2009).