Relational demography and officer occupational attitudes: The influence of workgroup context

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Researchers have long held an interest in understanding what role officer demographics play in explaining occupational attitudes. Despite this interest, evidence has consistently shown such relationships to be inconsistent. Using a relational demography framework that is based on the notion that demographic effects are contextual rather than universal across all officers, the current study examines the extent to which officer demographics influences their occupational attitudes when viewed in relation to other officers in their assigned workgroup.
Methods: Surveys of 1,022 patrol officers assigned to 187 workgroups were used to examine demographic effects across a number of occupational attitudes. A series of multilevel modeling techniques were used to test the viability of the relational demography framework.
Results: Certain demographic effects changed or were attenuated after accounting for workgroup membership. Demographic effects were also found to differ across workgroup contexts. Finally, results for job satisfaction indicated that gender and experience effects were dependent upon the demographic and cultural context of the workgroup.
Conclusions: Demographic-attitudinal relationships are influenced by the broader workgroup environment. The results also highlight the importance of taking into consideration non-independence issues associated with attitudes and demographics from both theoretical and analytical perspectives.

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Introduction

The study of officers' occupational attitudes has been a cornerstone of policing research for almost fifty years. Such attitudes commonly include officer views toward prominent features of their organizational environments (e.g., the administration, supervision, and job satisfaction) and their occupational environments (e.g., citizens, role orientations, and policing tactics). Collectively, these attitudes have become "central constructs" in empirical research on the police (Worden, 1995: 49). One line of research has focused on identifying factors that explain attitudinal differences among officers and has emphasized the importance of demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race, age, education, experience). Results from this line of research, however, have indicated that these characteristics are rather inconsistent and weak predictors of officer attitudes (Carlan, 2007; Lord & Friday, 2008; Paoline, Myers, & Worden, 2000; Worden, 1993; Zhao, Thurman, & He, 1999). As such, the utility for examining the effect of demographic characteristics on officer attitudes has come into question.

There are, however, three issues that could account for the limited and inconsistent support for demographic influences on officers'

occupational attitudes. First, prior research has largely examined demographic-attitudinal relationships as universal, or absolute, in nature. In doing so, it implies that these relationships exist in a social vacuum, uninfluenced by the broader environment in which officers' work or by other officers (Drummond, 1976; Frank & Brandl, 1991). Second, occupational attitudes are often treated as prescriptions of police culture, which is commonly defined as a set of shared attitudes (Herbert, 1998; Manning, 1995; Paoline, 2003). The notion that officers share attitudes suggests that their responses reflect collective views toward officers' work environments instead of individual ones, potentially limiting the likelihood that individual-level characteristics will predict attitudinal variation (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Finally from an analytical perspective, non-independence issues may be encountered as a result of the previous two issues, leading to biased estimates of demographic effects.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the potential effects these issues have on the relationship between demographic characteristics and officers' occupational attitudes. To do so, we apply a relational demography approach within officer workgroups as a theoretical framework. Relational demography proposes that an individual's demographic similarity (or dissimilarity) to others in an organizational entity affects attitudes. A key component of this framework is that individuals' demographics lead to different attitudinal responses across

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various organizational contexts, dependent upon the demographic composition of the organizational entity (Riordan & Shore, 1997). The entity central to our framework is officer workgroups, defined as patrol officers assigned to the same squad or work schedule (i.e., days on duty), on the same shift, and in the same precinct. Officer attitudes have been found to vary across workgroups, and officers within workgroups have been found to share occupational attitudes (Ingram, Paoline, & Terrill, 2013).

We begin with a review of the literature on officer occupational attitudes. Here, prior research that has examined demographic influences on officer attitudes is presented. This section is followed by a discussion of relational demography within the workgroup context and how it applies to the study of officer demographics and attitudes. Next, we provide an overview of the survey methodology, attitudinal measures, and group-level properties across 187 workgroups. We then present findings from three sets of analyses that test the extent to which demographic effects vary across workgroup contexts. Finally, we discuss the implications of this research for future studies on police officer attitudes.

Occupational attitudes of police

The study of officers' occupational attitudes arose out of a set of early observational studies of the police (i.e., Bittner, 1970; Manning, 1997 [1977]; Rubinstein, 1973; Skolnick, 1967; Van Maanen, 1974; Westley, 1970). Collectively, these studies provided insight into the unique features of officers' work environments and the ways in which officers responded to them. Such responses have come to be conceptualized as a set of attitudes that comprise officers' occupational outlooks (Worden, 1995). The most prevalent attitudes included views toward citizens (Manning, 1997; Skolnick, 1967; Rubinstein, 1973; Westley, 1970), role orientations (Bittner, 1970; Manning, 1997), policing tactics (Bittner, 1970; Van Maanen, 1974), supervision (Van Maanen, 1974; Reuss-Ianni, 1983), and job satisfaction (Worden, 1995).

The study of occupational attitudes was further refined by officer typology studies (Broderick, 1977; Brown, 1988; Muir, 1977; White, 1972). While early observational studies essentially assumed officers' held similar attitudinal outlooks as a result of working in the same occupation, typology studies found that officers responded differently to their work environments, leading to attitudinal differences (Brown, 1988). Based on the nature of these responses, officers were then grouped together into common types (Worden, 1995). Typology studies provided evidence of variation in officer attitudes and noted that this variation was theoretically meaningful. For example, Worden (1995: 49) noted that the identification of different officer types indicates that "officers are not psychologically homogenous." This notion has been important to the conceptual development of officers' occupational attitudes as it has directed research to investigate potential sources of attitudinal variation. This has subsequently led to a body of research seeking to explain attitudinal differences across officers (e.g., Paoline et al., 2000).

Demographic influences on officer attitudes

Research that has aimed to explain attitudinal differences among officers has focused attention on the effect of individual demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race, age, education, experience) on officers' attitudes (Manning, 2005; Paoline et al., 2000). Two perspectives have often been offered for why demographic characteristics should account for attitudinal differences. The trait-based approach proposes that differences in officers' backgrounds lead to differences in how they view police work (Sun, 2003). For example, female officers are said to have "fundamentally different priorities and perspectives on human relationships" and these differences lead to variation in how male and female officers view their jobs (Worden, 1993: 204). A second approach takes a diversity perspective. Based on the notion that the occupation of policing has become increasingly diverse with the inclusion of more women, minority, and college educated officers, this approach

contends that a greater diversity of social backgrounds leads to attitudinal differences (Paoline et al., 2000).

A number of studies have examined the influence of officer demographics on occupational attitudes. Table 1 provides a summary of seventeen studies conducted in this area. The seventeen studies were selected and highlighted for three reasons: 1) each focused on attitudes associated with those derived from early observational or typology studies, 2) they examined the effect of at least one demographic characteristic on officer attitudes, and 3) they employed multivariate analyses as a way to control for potentially confounding effects. As such, it should be noted that the studies reviewed may not represent an exhaustive list. Furthermore, while each of the studies examined demographic effects on officer attitudes, demographics may not have been the primary, or exclusive, focus of the research (e.g., Johnson, 2012; Lord & Friday, 2008; Zhao et al., 1999). Overall, two important patterns emerge from this body of research.

First, the results reported by these studies indicate that officer demographics are rather weak predictors of occupational attitudes. Even though this set of studies has found officer characteristics to significantly predict attitudinal differences among officers, the amount of variation that is explained by these characteristics is relatively small. For example, the studies on job satisfaction note that demographics explain between four to eight percent of the variation in satisfaction levels (Carlan, 2007; Dantzker & Kubin, 1998; Hunt & McCadden, 1985; Johnson, 2012; Zhao et al., 1999). Similar results have been reported for other attitudes as well (e.g., DeJong, 2004; Worden, 1990, 1993).

Second, the results point out inconsistencies regarding the nature of the relationship between demographics and several attitudes. Take for example, research that has examined gender differences on officer attitudes. Some studies have reported female officers to hold broader role orientations (Sun, 2003) or hold more positive attitudes towards community policing (Schafer, 2002), while others have noted female officers to hold more negative attitudes towards order maintenance (Paoline et al., 2000). Other studies reported different findings for female officer views toward law enforcement (Worden, 1990, 1993) or views toward use of force (Brooks, Piquero, & Cronin, 1993). Finally, discrepant effects have been found for gender differences and views toward citizens (DeJong, 2004; Sun, 2002; Worden, 1993).[1] Such inconsistencies make it difficult to draw conclusions regarding the extent to which demographics influence officer attitudes.

Three reasons exist that could account for the limited and inconsistent support for demographic influences on officer attitudes. First, extant research has largely treated demographic effects as universal, or absolute, in nature. In doing so, demographic effects on officer attitudes are assumed to be the same, or similar, across all officers. By treating demographic-attitudinal relationships as universal, it implies that they are uninfluenced by the broader environment or other officers (Frank & Brandl, 1991; Drummond, 1976). Researchers, however, have stressed the importance of examining how officers' environments impact their attitudes (Brooks et al., 1993; DeJong, 2004; Hassell, 2006; Paoline et al., 2000; Poteyeva & Sun, 2009; Sun, 2002, 2003). Since officers' attitudes are also likely to be shaped by their work environments and interactions with other officers, in addition to individual-level characteristics, demographic influences might be context dependent rather than universal, or absolute. Research in this area, however, is currently underdeveloped as recent reviews of demographic effects on officer attitudes have noted that the impact of environmental characteristics has been "rarely assessed" (Poteyeva & Sun, 2009: 520).

Second, the occupational attitudes of police are often treated as prescriptions of police culture, which is commonly defined as a set of shared attitudes, values, and norms that officers use to cope with the challenges faced in their work environments (Herbert, 1998; Manning, 1995; Paoline, 2003). Research in the organizational sciences has found that when employees are exposed to common work environments and develop shared views of them, it reduces the likelihood that individual characteristics will predict outcomes of interest (Kozlowski & Klein,