



The influence of strain on law enforcement legitimacy evaluations[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: While law enforcement officers have the state-sanctioned authority to use force as a way to ensure citizen obedience with the law, research has found that when private citizens evaluate the police as legitimate, they are more likely to comply with legal demands and cooperate with the police. Although procedural justice has shown to be a highly significant predictor of perceived police legitimacy, research has found other correlates of this outcome, including ethnic identity, low self-control and structural economic disadvantage. To date, no study has explored whether strain influences perceptions of the legitimacy of law enforcement.

Methods: A series of linear regression equations was estimated using survey data collected from a convenience sample of college students to determine the effect of strain on perceived police legitimacy.

Results: Even after controlling for procedural justice, strain exerted a negative and statistically significant influence on law enforcement legitimacy evaluations.

Conclusions: Police officers are encouraged to interact with citizens in procedurally just manners and to also consider people's strain levels when enforcing the law.

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Introduction

Widespread public observance of the law is a core feature of any functioning democratic society. Although the police are one of the more important agencies responsible for ensuring that all citizens conform to legal demands (Black, 1970; Lambert et al., 2010; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993; Terrill, 2003), a long-standing debate has ensued regarding the most appropriate avenues officers should follow in their quest to enforce the law. On the one hand, while the police have the state-sanctioned authority to use force as a method of behavioral regulation, critics have downplayed this approach by highlighting its potential to produce fatal outcomes or other serious consequences (Beetham, 1991; Bottoms, 2002; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Pioneering work from Tyler (1990), on the other hand, has found that when private citizens view the police as legitimate authority figures, they are more likely to comply with legal demands and follow police directives. Not only does soliciting favorable legitimacy evaluations offer a safer alternative than the use of force for enforcing the law, but a growing body of work even contends that this strategy is more effective (Murphy & Gaylor, 2010; Murphy, Hinds, & Fleming, 2008; Roberts & Hough, 2005; Tankebe, 2008, 2013; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

For officers to appear legitimate in the eyes of the public, it is important they adhere to process-based models of regulation. This form of policing is subsumed under procedural justice theory, which explains that when officers afford public members a voice in legal outcomes and treat each citizen with respect and dignity, they are more likely to elicit favorable legitimacy ratings in return (Murphy & Gaylor, 2010; Murphy, Tyler, & Curtis, 2009; Reisig, Bratton, & Gertz, 2007; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Thibault & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 1990; Wolfe, 2011). Positive legitimacy perceptions, as referenced, have in turn been associated with public compliance with the law and cooperation with the police (Gau, 2011; Mesko, Reisig, & Tankebe, 2012; Murphy & Gaylor, 2010; Murphy et al., 2009; Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2012; Paternoster, Brame, Bachman, & Sherman, 1996; Tyler & Wakslak, 2004). The considerable empirical support offered for the procedural justice-police legitimacy relationship prompted Tyler (1990, 2003) to claim that procedurally fair behaviors by law enforcement are the most important, and sometimes only, predictors of perceived police legitimacy. Although this claim has been upheld by a number of studies, recent investigations have uncovered other significant correlates of this outcome, including ethnic identity (Lee, Steinberg, & Piquero, 2010), low self-control (Wolfe, 2011), structural economic disadvantage (Gau, Corsaro, Stewart, & Brunson, 2012) and legal cynicism (Gau, 2014). Neglected within this line of work, however, is the role individual strain levels play in influencing police legitimacy assessments.

Arguing against biological determinants of criminality, Merton and Ashley-Montagu (1940) stressed socio-cultural placement within the wider American society as a key factor related to anti-social conduct. Specifically, discordance between the culturally venerated goal

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of economic prosperity and the legitimate (law-abiding) mechanisms through which it is achieved produces a state of anomie that promotes criminal behavior on behalf of the disenfranchised. Members of the lower economic strata are socialized to believe that monetary success affords high-ranking status within the American society, yet it is these very individuals who are obstructed from any socially approved (i.e., educational and occupational opportunities) means by which to achieve such a societal position. This disjunction fosters strain among the lower class, who in response resort to their only available channel by which to satisfy the highly regarded ambition of economic success—deviance (Merton, 1938). Authors have since expanded the sources of strain, to include status discontent (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955), the presentation of noxious stimuli, the loss of positive stimuli and the failure to achieve positively valued goals (Agnew, 1992) as well as institutional anomie (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). Findings from research have revealed modest to generally supportive evidence for the strain-crime relationship (Agnew, 1985; Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen, 2002; Agnew & White, 1992; Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1996); however, less attention has been directed at the role strain plays in shaping people's perceptions of law enforcement legitimacy.

This is an important oversight given how an increasing number of studies have found strain levels to affect individual perceptions, including of the police (Ahn, Park, & Baek, 2007; Brick, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2009; Slate, Wells, & Johnson, 2003; Webster-Stratton, 1990). To address this void in the literature then, the present study relies upon cross-sectional survey data collected from a convenience sample of undergraduate college students. Different sources of strain are included in analyses in order to assess their ability to predict perceived police legitimacy. Results from the current investigation not only expand our understanding of the predictors of law enforcement legitimacy evaluations, but may offer important policy recommendations for police practitioners, academics and other stakeholders.

Procedural justice theory

For decades now, criminologists have been concerned with exploring the sources of public compliance with the law (Agnew, 1992; Akers, 1985; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1991; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tankebe, 2013; Tyler, 1990; Warr & Stafford, 1991). Though many of these authors agree that government officials, and specifically the police, are agents who play a pivotal part in framing people's behavior, disagreement persists regarding the most effective strategies officers can employ to influence this outcome. Some have argued that the threat of or actual application of formal sanctions, such as force or other deterrent mechanisms, best satisfies the police objective of bringing individuals into line with societal expectations of behavior (Fagan & Meares, 2008; Greenfield, Langan, Smith, & Kaminski, 1997). Citizens will obey the law because of their fear of reprisal "from those who hold control over the formal mechanisms of power and punishment" (Papachristos et al., 2012, p. 401). Law enforcement officials have long depended upon the use of force or similar sanctions to perform their job, yet a recent line of inquiry has unearthed a number of limitations with this strategy. Most citizens do not appreciate being handled in coercive manners and will often respond to such treatment in retaliatory or defiant ways (Sherman, 1993; Terrill, 2003; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Moreover, given how officers cannot police all segments of a given population, they are unable to invoke force in every situation perhaps requiring it (Wolfe, 2011). In response, research has found an alternative strategy officers can use to affect citizen obedience.

Large-scale voluntary acceptance of the law is achieved when the majority of a population shares the belief that authority symbols, like the police, are legitimate representatives of society (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Thibault & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 1990). Tyler (1990) explains that legitimacy "represents an acceptance by people of the need to

bring their behavior into line with the dictates of an external authority that has the right to dictate behavior" (p. 25). Ultimately what this means is that when individuals believe a ruling authority has the moral right and obligation to enforce codes of conduct and that those same ruling authorities are fair in their enforcement of the law, cooperative behaviors will follow because of the sense of morality these beliefs instill in people (Reisig et al., 2007; Reisig, Tankebe, & Mesko, 2012; Sunshine, 2006; Tankebe, 2013). Much as there has been debate over the strategies officers should adopt to enforce the law, different arguments have also surfaced regarding the antecedents of police legitimacy evaluations.

Perceived police legitimacy has generally been attributed to either one of two broad factors—instrumental or normative (Reisig et al., 2012). Supporters of the instrumental perspective argue that police legitimacy assessments are the product of whether public members believe the police are competent crime fighters. Private citizens must be satisfied with the job performance of officers in order to develop strong judgments about the legitimacy of law enforcement (Rothschild, 1977; Tankebe, 2008). Instead the normative perspective claims that legitimacy results from people's evaluations of the processes by which ruling authorities exercise their power. Perceptions of the fairness, neutrality and honesty of officers play a significant role in not only developing but maintaining people's long-term police legitimacy evaluations (Thibault & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 1990). Investigations into the predictors of perceived police legitimacy have consistently found normative, more so than instrumental factors, to significantly influence people's evaluations of the legitimacy of law enforcers (Gau, 2011; Lee et al., 2010; Mesko et al., 2012; Murphy & Gaylor, 2010; Murphy et al., 2009; Papachristos et al., 2012; Sunshine, 2006; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990).

The normative perspective is guided by procedural justice theory, which explains that when public members are treated in procedurally fair manners by police officers, they are more likely to view law enforcement as legitimate (Reisig et al., 2007; Tyler, 1990). Procedurally fair behaviors are classified under two broad categories—quality of decision-making and quality of treatment. Citizens will favorably rate officer decision-making if the police afford citizens an opportunity to voice their concerns during legal ordeals, if the police are neutral in their decision-making processes and if the police are consistent in their enforcement of the law. Quality of treatment is determined by whether officers are polite when interacting with citizens and whether officers respect people's civil and human rights (Paternoster et al., 1996; Reisig et al., 2012; Sunshine, 2006). Procedurally fair behaviors are such an important predictor of perceived legitimacy because when citizens are treated this way, it reaffirms their status as welcomed and valued members of society, which then translates into favorable judgments about the morality of the law (Gau et al., 2012; Reisig et al., 2012). Despite a wealth of research finding strong connections between procedural justice and perceived police legitimacy, a number of studies have uncovered other significant correlates of this outcome.

Lee et al. (2010) found that sample members who reported stronger ethnic identity were statistically more likely to hold high legitimacy perceptions of the police when compared to their counterparts. Wolfe (2011) used survey data from a convenience sample of college students to determine how low self-control was a significant and negative predictor of perceived police legitimacy. An inverse association between macro-level concentrated disadvantage and perceptions of the legitimacy of law enforcement was observed by Gau et al. (2012). Among a sample of undergraduate college students, Ferdik, Wolfe, and Blasco (2013) found both stronger parental attachment and school commitment to modify the procedural justice-police legitimacy relationship. Gau (2014), finally, found that declines in legal cynicism promoted positive police legitimacy evaluations. Despite Tyler's (1990, 2003) claim that procedural justice is the most influential predictor of perceived police legitimacy, evidently other factors account for variance in legitimacy ratings. Given the importance of perceived police legitimacy in initiating

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