Race-dependent changes in attitudes towards the police among college students in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray and the subsequent period of unrest

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ABSTRACT

Social coalitions enable humans to thrive, but deciding which groups to trust and align with can be a difficult endeavor. In modern societies, citizens who have been victimized are expected to allow professional police officers to act on their behalf. However, research indicates that levels of trust in the police vary considerably and can be influenced by many factors. This study's initial purpose was to assess how attitudes towards police are influenced by features of one's childhood neighborhood. Undergraduate students (N = 87) at the University of Baltimore were recruited to participate. After the period of unrest in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, we collected follow-up data from 47 undergraduate students, including 14 participants from the original sample. We completed both a between-subjects and within-subjects analysis on participants' responses. Examining the African American and Caucasian samples separately revealed that the attitudes had differentially changed. Specifically, in the African American sample, attitudes towards police became significantly less favorable, whereas in the Caucasian sample they became significantly more favorable.

KEYWORDS

Policing, Civil Disorder, Prosociality, Costly Punishment

A key feature of social species is that individuals are sensitive to signals of group membership and group loyalty (see Bogardus, 1924). Successful alliances can benefit group members in terms of status, mate access, and resources (Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003), but entering a coalition also exposes one to potential exploitation by other group members. This risk-benefit trade-off has been a powerful selective force in human evolution. Humans are the most social primate species, and their ecological dominance over other species has caused competition with

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other humans to become a principal concern, one best addressed by forming successful coalitions (Alexander, 1979). Consequently, humans are particularly sensitive to cues that signal group membership, and will routinely discriminate against out-groups in favor of in-groups (Sherif, 1966; Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Although powerful groups may have more resources than disenfranchised groups, joining a powerful group will only be beneficial if the benefits are equitably distributed. Thus, when determining which groups to align with, it is important to consider how cohesive, trustworthy, and equitable each group is, in addition to its overall status.

In the developed world, a professional police force is typically charged with maintaining public order and preventing crime. Citizens are expected to place their trust in the police and to defer to them in matters involving threats, disputes, and conflicts. However, not all citizens feel that the police adequately represent their interests in every situation. Cases involving brutality or corruption on the part of the police can further erode trust in the institution (Tyler, Goff, & MacCoun, 2015). Effective law enforcement relies on the participation of everyday community members and their cooperation with local police. If the actions of the police do not appear consistent with the needs and priorities of the community, the police will come to be viewed as an out-group and cooperation will deteriorate.

The relationship between community members and local police is an important social issue that has received increased attention in the United States in light of recent events. The May 2015 President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing signaled a shift in focus from legalistic concerns and assessments of police effectiveness to concern for how police actions influence public trust and confidence in the police, a shift facilitated by empirical support from psychological research (Tyler et al. 2015). Past efforts to improve community-police relations have often focused resources on detecting and punishing criminal behavior. However, even when such deterrence efforts lead to a reduction in the crime rate, they may not have any corresponding effect on perceptions of police legitimacy. Considering the United States as a whole, violent crime has declined by approximately 48% since 1993 (U.S. Department of Justice & Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012), while confidence in the police has remained virtually unchanged during this time (see Tyler et al., 2015).

The police are tasked with serving the public interest, and law enforcement officers frequently put themselves at risk in order to prevent others from doing harm to society. Taking such action can be viewed as a form of costly, or altruistic, punishment (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). Research has demonstrated that costly punishment generally does lead to enhanced cooperation in the population (see Balliet, Mulder, & Van Lange, 2011). However, it also creates pressure for the punishers to maximize benefits relative to costs by becoming corrupt (Úbeda & Duéñez-Guzmán, 2011). Corruption or unprofessional conduct by the police can lead to distrust among members of the community, which in turn can make it more difficult for the police to do their job effectively (Tyler et al. 2015).

There is growing empirical evidence demonstrating that perceptions of police legitimacy among members of a community impact the likelihood of cooperation between community members and the police (Tyler et al. 2006a, 2006b). Thus, in order for community policing approaches to work, there must be a prerequisite level

of trust in the police, as well as a perception that the authorities implement sanctions fairly and treat people with respect (Tyler et al. 2015). When legal authority is perceived as legitimate, people are more likely to attend neighborhood meetings, report criminal behavior, and serve as witnesses. Such legitimacy also decreases the willingness to engage in riots, looting, and other disruptive behaviors (Jackson, Huq, Bradford, & Tyler 2013; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). Thus, understanding what determines these popular perceptions of police legitimacy is critically important for improving community-police relations and public safety.

Attitudes towards the police are influenced by demographic factors, as well as the police department's interactions with citizens. African Americans and Latinos generally possess less favorable perceptions of police than Whites (Brunson, 2007). Confidence in the police also differs by race; about two thirds of White Americans express confidence in the police, whereas only one third of Black Americans have similar confidence, and even fewer among Black Americans living in urban areas (Jones, 2014).The attitudes of minority residents in depressed urban communities, especially African Americans, have been shaped by experiences of injustice by the police and the larger criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999). Observed racial differences in attitudes toward the police can also be explained by unfavorable responses to zero-tolerance policing approaches in minority neighborhoods, and the disproportionate levels of contact with police for minorities (Rice & Parkin, 2010; Nguyen, 2005). African Americans, in particular, were distrusting of the police and less likely to report crimes and cooperate with police independent of other social demographics such as community-social-capital and poverty (MacDonald & Stokes, 2006).

Urban disturbances can occur when a distrusting public is confronted with allegations regarding inappropriate police practices (Lai & Zhao, 2010). Residents of different neighborhoods within a metropolitan area may exhibit differing attitudes towards police based on previous interactions within said neighborhoods. These interactions may include crimes committed by the police, ineffective policing, response times, and neighborhood presence (Frank, 2005).

Our initial intention in this research was to assess individual's attitudes towards police in their neighborhood among a racially diverse sample of students from the Baltimore area and investigate how neighborhood attributes affected police attitudes. The first round of data collection began on December 1st, 2014 and ended on March 13th, 2015. The death of Freddie Gray occurred soon after data collection, on April 19th, 2015. This was followed by allegations of police brutality, protests, violence, arson, looting, and presence of the National Guard. These events created the opportunity for a naturalistic experiment assessing the consequences for police attitudes in the community, and how perceptions of police legitimacy may have been impacted. The second round of data collection began on May 3rd and ended on May 20th, 2015. We hypothesized that African-American individuals, in response to the events surrounding the death of Freddie Gray, would become less trusting and would have more negative attitudes towards the police compared to the initial assessment, a pattern that would contrast with responses of Caucasians who may exhibit the opposite effects.

METHODS

This study received prior approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Baltimore and was conducted in compliance with the approved protocol. All participants signed a form to indicate their informed consent to participate. This consent form included the following disclaimer:

"Although no names or personal identifiers will be associated with my responses, I will be asked to report my childhood street address rounded to the nearest 100-address-block. Thus, there is a possibility that someone familiar with my personal history may be able to identify my responses. However, all data will be kept confidential and will not be made public."

Participants were undergraduate students of Psychology at the University of Baltimore who completed previously validated items (Reisig, Bratton, & Gertz, 2007) assessing perceptions of procedural justice: "The police in my neighborhood...1) Treat people with respect; 2) Take time to listen to people; 3) Explain their decisions to people they deal with; and 4) Can be trusted." Participants were asked to assess their agreement on the previous questions on a 5-point, Likert-type scale from "strongly disagree" or "strongly agree." Additionally, participants were asked to rate on a 5-point, Likert-type scale their likelihood to participate in the following: 5) "How likely would you be to contact the police to report a crime if one occurred?" and "How likely would you be to talk with a police officer for any other reason?" Responses were summed to yield Police Attitude Scores.

Socioeconomic status (SES) was assessed using three survey items taken from Griskevicius et al. (2011). Each item asked the participant to indicate agreement with a statement on a seven-point rating scale. The three items were: "I have enough money to buy the things I want," "I don't need to worry too much about paying my bills," and "I don't think I'll have to worry too much about money in the future." Responses were averaged to yield a current SES score for each participant. Higher scores indicated higher perceived status. Participants also provided demographic information and their primary childhood address rounded to the nearest address block. Participants were primarily lifelong Baltimore city residents, and relatively diverse in terms of self-reported race and socioeconomic status. The first wave of data collection (N = 87) occurred during Fall 2014 and early Spring 2015. The sample consisted of 68 women and 19 men, aged 18 to 57 (M = 26.29, SD = 10.46). Fifty-two participants identified as African-American, 22 as Caucasian, 4 as Hispanic, 4 as Asian, and 5 as 'other'. Current SES scores ranged between 1 and 7 (M = 4.48, SD = 1.54) and were slightly higher in the African-American sample (M = 4.70, SD = 1.47) than in the Caucasian sample (M = 3.95, SD = 1.47), although this difference was not significant [t (68) = -1.84, p = .070].

The second wave of data collection (N = 47) from the same population was conducted just after the citywide curfew was lifted on May 3rd. Data collection was terminated at the end of the spring semester. The sample consisted of 31 women and 16 men, aged 18 to 51 (M = 22.72, SD = 6.79). Twenty-six participants identified as African-American, 18 as Caucasian, and 3 as 'other'. Current SES scores ranged between 1 and 7 (M = 4.48, SD = 1.65). The African-American and Caucasian samples did not differ significantly in terms of current SES [t (42) = -.28,

p = .778]. We were able to identify 14 participants who responded to both surveys by matching childhood address blocks; 8 Caucasian, and 6 African American We completed both a between-subjects and within-subjects analysis of variance for police attitudes within the entire combined sample. Race and Testing Time were used to predict Police Attitude Scores within our Caucasian and African American participants due to the small number of participants from other racial groups.

RESULTS

In our first sample, Police Attitude Scores ranged from 7 to 30 (*M* = 19.04, *SD* = 5.83). We analyzed group differences only for African Americans and Caucasians. An independent groups *t* test revealed a significant difference in Police Attitude Scores, *t* (66) = 2.63, *p*=.011, with Caucasians having more favorable views towards the police than African Americans (see Table 1). In our follow-up sample, Police Attitude Scores ranged from 6 to 30 (*M* = 19.49, *SD* = 6.59). An independent groups *t* test revealed a significant difference in Police Attitude Scores, *t* (40) = 3.67, *p*<.001, such that self-identified Caucasians had more favorable views towards the police than self-identified African Americans (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mean Police Attitude Scores for Caucasians and African Americans

Sample	Race		*t*	*df*	Cohen's *d*
	Caucasians	African Americans			
Initial	21.67 (3.97)	17.96 (5.86)	2.63[*]	66	.74
Follow-Up	23.41 (5.84)	16.60 (5.96)	3.67[***]	40	1.15

Note. [*] = p < .05, [***] = p < .001. **Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.**

The two samples were analyzed using a 2 x 2 ANOVA, in which testing time and race were used to predict police attitudes. Results are displayed in the top half of Table 2. There was no main effect for Testing Time, but there was a significant main effect of Race and a trend towards a Race x Time interaction effect that fell short of significance.

Table 2. Race x Testing Time Factorial Analysis of Variance for Police Attitudes

Source	*df*	*F*	η^2	*p*
Between-Subjects				
(A) Testing Time	1	.029	.000	.866
(B) Race	1	21.195	.167	.001

A x B (interaction)	1	1.843	.017	.177
Error (within groups)	106			
Within-Subjects				
(A) Testing Time	1	.062	.005	.807
(B) Race	1	1.980	.142	.185
A x B (interaction)	1	7.543	.386	.018
Error (within groups)	12			

For the eight Caucasians and six African Americans that completed both rounds of data collection, we examined the change in police attitudes across the two time points. This within-subjects data was analyzed using a 2 x 2 mixed design ANOVA, in which testing time and race were used to predict police attitudes (See Table 2). There was no main effect for Testing Time, with similar scores at the first time point (M=21.50, SD=5.35) and the second time point (M=21.93, SD=6.38). No significant main effect was found for Race, but there was a significant Race x Time interaction effect. Examining the African American and Caucasian samples separately revealed that the attitudes had changed. Specifically, in the African American sample Police Attitude Scores decreased by an average of 1.67 points (SD=2.50), while in the Caucasian sample they increased by an average of 2.00 points (SD=2.45).

DISCUSSION

Law enforcement agencies around the United States are increasingly guided by a philosophy of community policing, which pays particular attention to how the police and their actions are viewed by members of the community. The construct of police legitimacy is a useful metric for evaluating the utility of approaches geared towards improving police-community relations. As Tyler et al. (2015) have noted, there is considerable overlap between the goals of community policing and legitimacy-based approaches to policing. The current study explores how controversial, high-profile events involving the police may impact perceptions of police legitimacy under naturalistic conditions.

Whereas attitudes towards the police became more negative among African American students, they became more positive among Caucasian students in the weeks following the death of Freddie Gray. Thus, race was found to be a critical factor in determining how individuals responded to these events. This finding is consistent with previous research that has documented adverse attitudes towards the police among African Americans (Frank, 2005; Lai & Zhao, 2010; T. R. Tyler, 2005). The results of this study imply that an individual's attitude toward the police is not static. Although the non-experimental nature of this study prevents us from ascribing a causal role to the death of Freddie Gray and subsequent period of unrest, it seems highly likely that the intense media coverage surrounding these events, the civil unrest that occurred within Baltimore city, and violence on the part of both citizens and law enforcement were likely primary factors in the observed

changes in attitudes. This coverage greatly increased public awareness of both the case in question and certain recurring societal issues, namely crime and police brutality.

We acknowledge that because our sample consisted of college students, there are limits in terms of generalizing to the population as a whole. However, our sample consisted primarily of lifelong residents of the Baltimore area, and the ethnic distribution closely matched that of the city as a whole. Furthermore, our participants were fairly diverse in terms of reported childhood socioeconomic status. Another limitation was our small sample size for the within-subjects analysis ($n = 14$). We did not originally plan for a longitudinal design; hence we were only able to obtain follow-up data from a small number of participants who happened to participate in both rounds of data collection. Although our within-subjects results fit the hypothesis and were in line with the between-subjects data, these should be interpreted cautiously due to the small sample size.

The "Black Lives Matter" movement has increased awareness of incidents such as the death of Freddie Gray, potentially leading to more unfavorable attitudes regarding the judicial system and police. Individuals who felt that the police represented their interests may have reacted to the events by becoming increasingly appreciative of a police presence during the period of civil unrest and heightened crime. Those who felt a sense of alienation or animosity with respect to the police may have reacted to the same events by becoming more apprehensive. The results of our naturalistic experiment suggest that racial identity remains a strong predictor of such reactions in the city of Baltimore.

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