

The police and those policed as intergroup *par excellence*: Current trends and future prospects

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Abstract

In many communities, certain segments of the population do not have trust and confidence in the police. These issues are particularly intense in some impoverished minority communities in which people are more likely to fear the police than to trust them. Much can be learned about the patterned dynamics between police and communities from the study of intergroup relations generally, and intergroup communication more specifically. Unfortunately, these phenomena have not yet been well studied from an intergroup perspective. In this prologue to the special issue, “The Police and the Policed,” we introduce contemporary trends in police–community relations from an intergroup perspective, and we provide a brief overview of the articles appearing in the special issue. We close by highlighting key take-aways from this collection, articulating a vision for future research on police–community relations from an intergroup perspective.

Keywords

community, intergroup communication, intergroup relations, police, police–community relations

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Introduction

Intergroup dynamics are endemic in nearly every aspect of police–community relations, yet these phenomena have not yet been well studied. In this prologue to the special issue, we begin by briefly discussing contemporary trends in police–community relations, a topic only recently coming under the intergroup lens. We then articulate an intergroup perspective on police–community relations. Next, we provide an overview of the articles

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Police–Community Relations: Contemporary Trends

The police are the subject of intense debate in many nations (e.g., Bradford et al., 2016; Katz & Maguire, 2020; Lave & Miller, 2019; Mesko et al., 2013; Schafer & Myers, 2021). Some people pledge enthusiastic and unwavering support for the police, such as many of those involved in the *Back the Blue* movement in the United States (Shanahan & Wall, 2021). Others are highly critical of the police and view them as behaving in a corrupt, brutal, and/or unjust manner (see Sherman, 2020; Shjarback & Maguire, 2021). Most people, particularly in the world’s developed democracies, fall somewhere between these two extreme positions (Italiano et al., 2021; Jang et al., 2010; Kutnjak Ivković, 2008). The level of attention focused on the police is due, in large part, to the power they wield in society. In most nations, they are the only governmental body authorized to use deadly force against others without prior judicial approval (Bittner, 1970; Klockars, 1985). How police choose to wield the authority granted to them helps to define the nature of the relationship between a government and its people. As noted by Bayley (1985, p. 5), how police exercise their authority is a useful gauge of “the reality of freedom” in a society.

Unfortunately, there have been many recent examples of police behaving in a heavy-handed manner during encounters with members of the public, particularly against minority groups (Alang et al., 2017; Maguire & Giles, 2022; for an intergroup perspective on reactions to news, see Boyer & Lecheler, 2022). These incidents have been widely reported in the conventional news media (e.g., Shrikant & Sambaraju, 2021; D. H. F. Tyler & Maguire, 2021) as well as social media (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Williams, 2021). In the United States, a long line of research evidence has documented the disproportionate outcomes that racial and ethnic minority groups face during their interactions with police. For example, several studies have found that

minority groups are more likely to be stopped (Gelman et al., 2007; Smith & Petrocelli, 2001), searched (Engel & Calnon, 2004; Leinfelt, 2006; Wright et al., 2021), arrested (Kochel, 2011), and to have force used against them (Hoekstra & Sloan, 2022; Morrow et al., 2017; Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002). These disparities exert a serious toll on the health and well-being of minority communities (Graham et al., 2020; McLeod et al., 2020). The use of deadly force against Black communities has become a particularly salient issue in the United States following the deaths of numerous unarmed African Americans whose behavior prior to their death did not pose a credible threat to officers or others (Maguire & Giles, 2022; Ross et al., 2021).

When Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd on May 25, 2020, the video documenting his slow-motion death quickly went viral via conventional and social media. George Floyd’s murder galvanized the nation *and* the world, as people took to the streets in record numbers to protest against police brutality and racial injustice (H. Giles, Hill et al., 2021; Kishi et al., 2021). Ironically, some of those who chose to participate in these protests against police brutality were met with excessive use of force by police officers relying on crowd control tactics that showed little regard for protesters’ civil rights (Maguire, 2021a, 2022). For example, when 12 protesters sued the City and County of Denver for violating their constitutional rights during the George Floyd protests, the jury found in favor of the protesters and awarded them \$14 million (Kasakove, 2022). Similarly, when two protesters sued the City of Austin for shooting them with “less lethal” beanbag rounds during the George Floyd protests, the city settled the lawsuit for \$10 million (Oxner & Fechter, 2022).

At the same time, many police officers were injured as protests in some cities devolved into riots that included violence, looting, and extensive property damage in the summer of 2020 (MCCA, 2020). Relatedly, the American public witnessed prolonged media attention to the horrific treatment of officers on January 6, 2021, when the U.S. Capitol was breached by thousands of angry rioters (Schmidt & Broadwater, 2021).

This perspective of police varies drastically from media coverage of officers huddled in a hallway and failing to confront an active shooter for more than an hour while he murdered children and teachers in a classroom in Uvalde, Texas (Oxner, 2022). The framing of these events through intergroup dynamics reveals an urgent need to examine the intergroup conflict that exists between police and the public. Improving intergroup relations and preventing intergroup conflict can be beneficial for both sides.

Intergroup Perspectives

The relationships between the police and the public are a classic example of *intergroup* relations (see, e.g., Boivin et al., 2018; H. Giles, Maguire et al., 2021; Molloy & Giles, 2002). In intergroup contexts, the way people perceive and interact with others is shaped heavily by their social or group identities and not just their own unique personal identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; see also, H. Giles & Walther, 2022). When a police officer stops a car and approaches the driver, the resulting conversation is based largely on the officer's identity as a police officer and the driver's identity as someone stopped by the police who is not free to leave (see, e.g., Lowrey-Kinberg, 2021). Understanding encounters between the police and the public can provide benefits for understanding not only the personal characteristics of the individuals and the situational characteristics of the encounter, but also the *social identities* of the people involved and the *intergroup dynamics* that occur between them. The social identity approach has a long history in social psychology (e.g., Demirden, 2021; Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel, 1978, 1982) and other disciplines (e.g., Huddy, 2001; Korte, 2007). It has been applied to policing in several areas of study that, surprisingly, are largely separate from one another. Below we examine three distinct lines of research, appearing in varying degrees of emphasis in the research reported in this special issue, that view encounters by police and the public from an intergroup perspective and that rely heavily on the social identity approach.

Procedural Justice

Perhaps the most well-known area of study that incorporates these perspectives focuses on procedural justice and its effects (see, e.g., the article by Maguire et al., 2023, in this issue). Procedural justice theory (PJT) posits that when interacting with authority figures such as police officers, people make judgments about the extent to which those authority figures treat them in a procedurally just or fair manner (see T. R. Tyler & Huo, 2002; Wood et al., 2020). Those procedural justice judgments, in turn, influence people's decisions about whether to cooperate or comply with those authority figures and the institutions they represent (Maguire et al., 2017; Mazerolle et al., 2012, 2013; T. R. Tyler, 2006). Undergirding PJT is the *group engagement model*, which provides an explanation "for why procedural justice shapes cooperation in groups, organizations, and societies" (T. R. Tyler & Blader, 2003, p. 352). According to the model, people's decisions to cooperate and comply are shaped heavily by their interest in developing and sustaining a favorable identity. That identity information flows from people's evaluations of the extent to which they and other members of their group are treated in a procedurally just manner. Underlying procedural justice theory is a chain of hypothesized effects in which procedural justice judgments influence people's social identities which, in turn, influence their cooperation, compliance, and other outcomes. Thus, procedural justice theory is based heavily on social identity and intergroup relations dynamics (Bradford, 2014; Bradford et al., 2014; Radburn & Stott, 2019).

Randomized experiments conducted in both laboratory and field settings have found that procedural justice has a variety of positive effects for police and communities. For example, laboratory experiments using randomly assigned video or text vignettes reveal that procedural justice is associated with increased trust and confidence in police, obligation to obey the law and legal authorities, and willingness to cooperate with police (Johnson et al., 2017; Lowrey et al., 2016; Madon et al., 2022; Maguire et al., 2017; Reisig et al., 2018). Evidence

from randomized field trials of procedural justice *training* in several settings is mixed, but reveals that such training results in a variety of beneficial effects. These include improvements in police attitudes and behaviors, as well as public perceptions of the police (Antrobus et al., 2019; Rosenbaum & Lawrence, 2017; Skogan et al., 2015; Weisburd et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2020). Finally, randomized field trials have tested the effects of procedural justice *interventions* carried out by police officers during two types of encounters: traffic stops (Mazerolle et al., 2012, 2013; Sahin et al., 2017), and interrogations of terrorism suspects (Langley et al., 2021). These studies showed that procedural justice interventions were associated with a variety of advantageous effects on attitudes and behavioral intentions. Across a range of randomized experiments conducted in different settings using different methods, the use of procedural justice by police officers has been found to improve police–community relations.

Communication Accommodation

Another area of study that draws on the social identity approach is based on *communication accommodation theory* (CAT). This is a theory “of relational and identity processes in communicative interaction” (Coupland & Jaworski, 1997, pp. 241–242). While CAT still focuses heavily on interpersonal dynamics (e.g., Soliz et al., 2022; Zhang & Pitts, 2019), it has also begun to embrace intergroup dynamics in the last decade or so (see, e.g., H. Giles et al., 2007; Palomares et al., 2016). Of interest here is that it has also been applied to the study of communication dynamics in policing (e.g., H. Giles et al., 2007; Hill et al., in press). CAT explores, from different disciplinary perspectives and across many cultures, languages, social groups, and applied social contexts, how (and why) people adjust their communication to accommodate or not accommodate each other, whether consciously or non-consciously. A person’s motives, goals, and identities play major roles in the communicative adjustments they make and, together with recipients’ attributions of their intent, shape the social consequences that arise for both parties (see H.

Giles, 2016). Critically, CAT allows for a crucial distinction between what people are *actually* communicating, what they *think* they are communicating, and how they anticipate that it will be interpreted by others. These gaps between intended and actual meaning can lead to misattributions, miscommunication, and communication breakdowns more generally (see Coupland et al., 1991). Many communication competence training programs focus heavily on *interpersonal* aspects of communication, whereas CAT training interventions also recognize the significance of the *intergroup* dynamics that often occur (see Pines et al., 2021). These intergroup dynamics are particularly salient during interactions between police and citizens (Hill et al., 2021).

Research on CAT in many different settings and samples has shown that attitudes towards police officers are less contingent on socio-demographic factors than on how accommodatively members of the public perceive officers to behave towards them (e.g., Choi et al., 2019). In most cultures, perceived officer accommodation leads to trust which, in turn, leads the public to view officers more favorably and to express a greater willingness to comply with their directives. For example, one study examined a random sample of video-recorded traffic stops coded with numerous measures of driver and officer accommodation and non-accommodation. Amongst an array of other findings, Dixon et al. (2008) found that while each party’s accommodativeness predicted the other’s, inter-racial encounters (i.e., White officers with Black drivers and vice versa) were coded as more non-accommodative than those where both driver and officer were of the same race. This intergroup communication climate was characterized by officers listening less, being more indifferent and dismissive, less approachable, and less polite than in intra-racial encounters. Similar findings have emerged for Hispanic officers and White drivers (H. Giles et al., 2012; also see Foster et al., 2022; Voigt et al. 2017).

Crowd Psychology and Behavior

A third area of study that draws on the social identity approach and intergroup dynamics

focuses on the relationships between police and crowds (see Stott et al., 2021). This research is highly salient in recent years given the police response to high-profile protests and riots in many nations. This line of research began with Reicher's (1984) account of police and crowd behavior before and during a riot that occurred in Bristol, England, in April, 1980. Reicher found that the overly harsh manner in which police treated people in the community led them to band together in opposition to the police. The riot occurred in direct response to public perceptions of unjust behavior by police. How police treated people influenced the social identity of certain Bristol residents and the resulting intergroup dynamics between those residents and police. Since then, a robust body of research evidence on crowd psychology and behavior has emerged (Drury, 2020; Drury et al., 2020; Stott et al., 2017).

In particular, the *elaborated social identity* model developed by Reicher and his colleagues is based on the premise that many crowd events are intergroup encounters and, therefore, people's social identities "must be understood in relation to the ongoing intergroup dynamic" (Drury & Reicher, 1999). In such circumstances, the behaviors of outgroups, such as counter-protesters or police, is part of the context in which crowd members form their social identities. For example, when police take indiscriminate enforcement action against an entire crowd in response to the illegal behavior of a small subset of it, crowd members may unite in opposition to the police. Understanding the role of social identity and intergroup dynamics can help police avoid taking steps that inadvertently instigate or escalate conflict and violence during crowd events (Maguire, 2015; Reicher et al., 2004, 2007; see also, Jean & Springer, 2021; Resch & Jones, 2021).

The common theme across these three distinct areas of study is the importance of social identity in shaping the intergroup dynamics between police and the public. Those social identity and intergroup dynamics are also the golden thread linking together the papers that appear in this special issue.

Overview of Contributions

All the articles in the special issue have at least some connection to the literature on procedural justice and legitimacy. This is not surprising given the important role of intergroup dynamics in the literature on these concepts (e.g., T. R. Tyler & Blader, 2003). The first article, by Edward Maguire, Belen Lowrey-Kinberg, and Devon Johnson (2023), notes that the extent to which authority figures behave in a procedurally just (or unjust) manner can have powerful effects on a variety of key outcomes. For example, procedural injustice has been shown to reduce people's sense of obligation to obey the law and their willingness to cooperate and comply with legal authorities. However, little is known about the psychological mechanisms responsible for producing these effects. Maguire and his colleagues examine the extent to which the relationships between procedural justice and several downstream outcomes are mediated by people's self-reported levels of anger. They find that video depictions of procedural injustice by the police increase anger among those observing these videos, which, in turn, decreases certain prosocial outcomes such as trust, obligation, and cooperation. These findings highlight the importance of emotion in mediating the effects of procedural justice. These findings also have key implications for how police are trained to manage their communications—and indeed their own emotions—when interacting with the public (see also Oxholm & Glaser, 2023, this issue).

In the next article, Kristina Murphy (2023) examines the effects of individual and situational factors on how ethnic minority groups interpret the behavior of police officers and suspects during vicarious encounters. Using a laboratory-style randomized experiment with more than 500 Muslim Australians, Murphy finds that participants had greater trust in the officer and were more willing to comply when the officer behaved and communicated in a procedurally just manner. However, the behavior of the suspect moderated this effect; the procedural justice effect was attenuated when the suspect behaved disrespectfully

toward police. Murphy's findings reveal that procedural justice promotes greater trust in the police and compliance among minorities, but these effects are influenced by various individual and situational factors.

Prejudice among police officers has been a highly salient topic in the United States, due in part to numerous recent high-profile shootings and deaths in custody of unarmed African Americans. Jonathan Jackson, Adam Fine, Ben Bradford, and Rick Trinkner (2023) investigate the consequences of such events on public attitudes toward defunding the police. Not only do they find extreme differences in support for the defunding police based on political ideology (liberal versus conservative), they also find significant variation in what the term "defunding" means for these groups. Liberals interpreted defunding as *reforming* the police, while conservatives interpreted it as *abolishing* the police. In line with procedural justice theory, respondents who viewed police as acting unjustly, overstepping their legal authority, and over-policing Black communities were more inclined to align with the Black Lives Matter movement and favor defunding the police. Those who believed police honor the limits of their authority and do not over-policing Black communities were less likely to support defunding the police. This study demonstrates clearly that public support for the police is heavily influenced by political ideology and social identity. These factors not only shaped people's level of support for the defunding the police movement, but also the way they interpreted the very *meaning* of that movement.

Many police administrators are currently faced with the challenge of finding effective mechanisms for preventing or reducing prejudice amongst their officers. Addressing this issue is essential for improving and/or preserving public perceptions of police legitimacy. Consistent with this perspective, Filip Van Droogenbroeck, Bram Spuyt, and Sanja Kutnjak Ivković (2023) assessed the impact of a unique one-day police training program which took place in a Holocaust remembrance museum in Belgium. The program was delivered to Belgian police officers and focused

on the causes and mechanisms of intergroup violence. It also emphasized the obligation of individual officers to intervene when they observe misconduct by their fellow officers. The findings reported by Van Droogenbroeck and colleagues reveal that the training program reduced ethnic prejudice among officers, both immediately following the training and after a one-month follow-up period. The training also reduced social dominance orientation immediately following the training, but the effect dissipated after one month. These findings provide researchers with exciting directions for further study, and they provide practitioners with inspiration about developing unique training initiatives for reducing ethnic prejudice in policing.

Much of the relationship between the police and the public involves the management of communication (both physical and verbal), and the perceptions of these communications, between members of both groups. Perfecta Oxholm and Jack Glaser (2023) examine one crucial element of these intergroup dynamics, namely, how officers report on the ways they communicate with the public and their explanations for how they choose to express themselves in different kinds of encounters. Oxholm and Glaser's qualitative analyses of data from in-depth interviews with police officers revealed a set of core "narrative themes," four of which they abstracted into a two-dimensional framework. The authors show how three of these communicative themes (advocacy, connection, and withholding) are sensitive to, and accommodate, the needs of people with whom officers interact. A fourth theme (cover) can, inadvertently, lead to public perceptions of the police as deceptive and illegitimate and can therefore exacerbate tensions between police and the public.

In the final article, Adam Fine and Kelsey Tom (2023) bring us back full circle to issues of procedural justice and legitimacy with a focus on the legal socialization of children from 7 to 11 years of age. They examine the extent to which children's beliefs that police have the same moral values as they do—what the authors refer to as a sense of *normative alignment*—influence their

willingness to cooperate with police. The authors find that as children age, they become *less* willing to voluntarily cooperate with police due primarily to the fact that their sense of normative alignment with police decreases with age. Put differently, older children in the sample sensed a lower level of normative alignment with police than younger children, and consequently they are less willing to cooperate with the police. These results reflect a disturbing lack of intergroup allegiance between children and police officers that may be difficult to ameliorate as they transition into adolescence and young adulthood.

Key takeaways from these contributions include:

- The way police officers treat people with whom they interact can result in powerful emotional reactions that influence people's willingness to cooperate and comply with the police.
- Procedural justice operates in concert with a panoply of other individual and contextual factors in shaping people's trust in, and compliance with, legal authorities.
- Police training can be crafted so as to attenuate implicit biases to marginalized outgroups at least in the short term, although this may have a less potent effect with officers who have to deal with violent crime more frequently.
- When officers use accommodative forms of communication with the public, it improves intergroup relations between them. However, according to officers, the demands of the job, in tandem with certain criminal scenarios, sometimes require them to adopt communication styles that can have the opposite effect.
- In the present climate, even children can have negative views of police that diminish their willingness to cooperate with police.

Throughout this *multi-method* special issue, it is gratifying to see important contributions that rely on intergroup theory in terms of social identity

frameworks being melded with and enriched by theories and concepts from other disciplines such as criminology and communication. The articles in this special issue represent important interdisciplinary contributions to the study of group processes and intergroup relations in policing. Nonetheless, there are inevitably multiple facets of understanding the police and the policed that are not addressed in this special issue.

The Police and those Policed: Future Intergroup Prospects

To help fill these gaps and move this field of research forward, we conclude in part by proposing the following areas of inquiry for future research on intergroup dynamics in police–community relations. Addressing these key research issues will help to expand upon the three principal domains of scholarship we described earlier.

First, the role of law enforcement in dealing with those policed—victims, suspects, witnesses, and others—depends, in ways little investigated, on the *nature of the crime* or legal violation involved. Among these are a wide range of crimes, including cybercrimes, white collar crimes, elder scams, terrorism, domestic and gang violence, hate crimes, and others that vary across a range of complex dimensions that demand investigation in terms of unpacking their implications for police–community relations.

Second, law enforcement engages many different types of media (Osterreicher, 2021) in different ways. One recent practice has been to proactively and regularly inform the public about the values and ideologies police agencies embrace, their reaction to police incidents elsewhere (such as the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the police inaction during the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas), and the kinds of actions they take locally in response to crime and other social problems. Determining the extent to which these and other communication strategies are effective in improving police–community relations would be a welcome addition to the literature.

Third, the police and those policed are, of course, heterogeneous groups, each composed of a

complex mosaic of different subgroups with overlapping personal and social identities (Coffin et al., 2022; May, 2022). Much remains to be learned about the intragroup and intergroup dynamics of these various intersectionalities (see Crenshaw, 1990; Grabe, 2020; Peterson & Panfil, 2014) and their implications for policing when law enforcement engages with members of the public.

Fourth, while the ingredients and design of interventions intended to enhance police–community relations could benefit from recent advances in intergroup contact theory (see, e.g., Paolini et al., 2021), police academies could also benefit from the inclusion of modules on intergroup theory more generally. Research shows that police academies tend to be a breeding ground for propagating particular cop cultures and mindsets (Hill & Giles, 2021; Prokos & Padavic, 2002). More generally, research from an intergroup perspective would be useful for understanding the occupational socialization of police officers and its impacts on the relationships between the police and those policed.

Fifth, police agencies in the United States and elsewhere are struggling to attract qualified applicants and retain the personnel they have in light of the current societal (and intergroup) climate discussed above, the effects of which can seriously undermine police service quality and public safety. Perhaps more careful attention to community-oriented values, informed by intergroup communication research, in the design of police recruiting strategies and materials might be a modest force in counteracting this pattern (M. Giles, 2022; Wieslander, 2018). Classic research has identified a “value gap” between the police and those policed (Rokeach et al., 1971). To the extent that recruiting strategies could help close that gap, they may be more successful. Research on the role of intergroup tensions in the emergence of the police recruitment crisis, as well as on the effectiveness of interventions meant to address those tensions, would be a valuable contribution to the scholarship in both intergroup relations and policing.

Sixth, there are signs that some police executives are now much more open to embracing and

applying research findings than hitherto (Gavin & Firman, 2022). Indeed, academics and police practitioners are strange bedfellows and are *themselves* vulnerable to the vagaries of intergroup boundaries and barriers of their own making that need to be addressed, investigated, and resolved (Maguire et al., 2022).

Finally, in recent years, the United States has witnessed the emergence of a significant police legitimacy crisis that resulted in a variety of different proposals for reform (see Katz & Maguire, 2020). Prime amongst these has been a renewed focus on:

- effective leadership (Barath, 2022; Taylor et al., 2022);
- improving officer health, wellness, and resilience (Maguire et al., 2020; Pallas, 2022);
- de-escalating potentially violent incidents to minimize the police use of force (Engel et al., 2022; White et al., 2021)
- implementing community-oriented policing (Cordner, 2014; Maguire, 2021b);
- embracing procedural justice and legitimacy (Weisburd et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2020);
- reducing racial inequities (Goff, 2021; Wallace et al., 2020); and
- reconsidering law enforcement’s role in responding to individuals with mental health issues (Minkoff & Gerena, 2021; Puntis et al., 2018).

In light of these and other social and institutional changes (e.g., Scott & Emerson, 2022; Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018), there is no better time for intergroup theory and research to be invoked and further developed to tackle what is, after all, an abiding societal problem. Indeed, both sides of the coin—the police *and* those policed—need to be better informed, educated, and trained about the intergroup dynamics and histories that shape their relationships with one another so as to reduce tensions and enhance communities’ sense of well-being and security. A major intent of crafting this special issue is to stimulate

intergroup researchers to pick up the gauntlet and investigate the forces at work in the relationships between police and those policed.

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