Identity, legitimacy and 'making sense' of police use of force

Original citation: Bradford, Ben and Milani, J. and Jackson, Jonathan (2017) *Identity, legitimacy and 'making sense' of police use of force.* Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management, 40 (3). pp. 614-627. ISSN 1363-951X
DOI: 10.1108/PIJPSM-06-2016-0085

Identity, Legitimacy and 'Making Sense' of Police Use of Force

Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines the extent to which police legitimacy and social identity explain variation in public acceptance of police use of force.

Design/methodology/approach: The study draws upon cross-sectional data from a 2015 survey of a representative sample of adults in England & Wales. Structural equation modeling is used to model conditional correlations between latent constructs.

Findings: There are two main results. First, identifying more strongly with a social group that the police plausibly represent to people was consistently associated with greater acceptance of police use of force, whether or not that force seemed to be justified. Second, beliefs about the legitimacy of the police were associated with acceptance, but primarily in relation only to the use of force in situations where it appeared prima facie justifiable.

Research limitations/implications: The data afford descriptive analyses of conditional correlations between constructs; they do not allow us to infer any cause-and-effect relationship.

Social implications (if applicable): Results suggest one possible set of reasons why police retain public support in the face of scandals concerning excessive use of force.

Originality/value: This is one of only a very few investigations into (a) the association between legitimacy and public acceptance of apparently illegal or unethical police action and (b) the extent to which identification with a particular social group predicts judgments of police behavior. It is also one of the few papers that has explored the possibility of perverse outcomes arising from procedurally just policing.

Keywords: Police; legitimacy; social identity; use of force

Recent events in the United Kingdom (such as the 2011 riots and the scandal around police infiltration of protest groups) and the United States (for example the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014) have refocused attention on police use of force, malpractice and illegality (Silver and Pickett, 2015). Along with intense media coverage and political debate, such events also trigger protests and other action. Yet, despite such tensions, public support for the police often remains relatively strong (ONS 2015). This presents something of a puzzle. Why do well publicized acts of police violence often fail to trigger wider or deeper challenges to the role and position of the police?

One explanation for why public support for police does not collapse in the face of sometimes egregious abuse is (a) that significant numbers of people legitimize police and identify with the group that the police represent, and (b) that this legitimization and identification shapes the way they experience and 'read' police activity. This paper explores this possibility. Drawing upon data from a representative sample of people in England and Wales, results suggest that identifying more strongly with a social category the police might plausibly be said to represent ('law-abiding British citizens') is associated with greater acceptance of police use of force – whether it seems legally justified or not. Legitimacy judgments, by contrast, tend to be associated only with the acceptance of use of force that appears justifiable. We conclude with the idea that the potentially delegitimatizing effect of future high-profile police violence may be dampened by people's existing (real and imagined) relationships with police.

Procedural justice, legitimacy and the limits of police power

Much of the work on legitimacy in policing is concerned with the rewards that enhanced legitimacy brings to the police, typically in terms of greater compliance with the law (Jackson et al. 2012a; Tyler, 2006), the willingness of citizens to defer to and cooperate with officers (Tyler and Huo, 2002; Tyler and Lind, 1992; Tyler and Jackson, 2014; Jackson et al. 2012b) and the belief that police monopolize rightful force in society (Jackson et al. 2013). The dominant account of this process is Tyler's procedural justice model. Procedural justice theory suggests that legitimacy is formed most importantly around fairness judgments. A great deal of empirical evidence has shown that when people believe the police operate in a fair, neutral, decent, respectful and open way they are more inclined to grant legitimacy to both organization and institution. The experience of procedural justice in direct police-citizen encounters generates a sense in people that they share norms and values with police, and encourages them to internalize the view that police directives should be listened to and obeyed.

This is not, of course, to suggest that other concerns (e.g. effectiveness, distributive justice or respecting the limits of their authority) are unimportant in shaping legitimacy (see for example Tankebe, 2009; Bradford et al. 2014a; Huq et al. 2016). But in most developed democracies these factors tend to be outweighed by procedural justice considerations. A clear implication of extant work into procedurally fair policing is that the need for police to generate and reproduce legitimacy serves to constrain police activity and limit police power (Bradford and Jackson, 2016; Coicaud, 2002). The fact that perceptions of procedural justice are consistently the most important factors shaping legitimacy judgments, coupled with the established notion that all social institutions rely on legitimacy for their continued existence (Zelditch, 2001), suggests that inasmuch as the police rely on legitimacy granted to them by those they police – and, to be sure, there are other sources of legitimacy, such as the location of the police within wider structures of power and authority – they cannot simply 'do what they want' to those they police.

The need to be seen to act in a procedurally fair manner means that officer behavior cannot regularly over-step accepted norms of fair process and fair treatment. If it does, legitimacy will be undermined, placing (by extension) doubt on the continued existence of the particular police organization concerned (or, at least, its senior

managers and political overseers). Under democratic conditions a police organization that *consistently and on a large scale* exceeded established norms of probity and fairness would eventually find its legitimacy, and thus its continued existence in its given organizational form, under threat. Outside pressures would be brought to bear on the organization, for example by rights groups, community organizations, or legal activists, that might result in significant organizational change and even rupture.

The history of British policing over the last 40 years can be seen in exactly this light. Police in England, Wales and Scotland probably do behave in procedurally – and indeed substantively – fairer ways than in the past, and one reason they do so is precisely that the revelation of legitimacy-undermining activities over the course of the 1970s, 80s and 90s generated multiple forms of social, legal and political attention focused on the activity of police, at local and national levels. It does not seem entirely unrealistic to suggest: (a) that police practice altered as a result of this pressure; and (b) that the need to retain and indeed regenerate legitimacy was one reason for this change.

However, Harkin (2015a, 2015b) has recently argued that procedural justice researchers should direct more attention toward those aspects of police legitimacy that are more troublesome to liberal sensibilities than the established focus on fairness. He notes, for instance, that people may base their legitimacy judgements on the extent to which police direct their attention on denigrated out-groups (2015b). Harkin also uses Lukes' (2005) notion of power to argue that the ideology surrounding policing, and the symbolic and physical powers vested in police, can be important factors generating legitimacy in particular social contexts. He draws on established work on procedural justice and system justification theory (e.g. Van Den Toorn et al. 2011) to argue that some people are motivated to legitimize the police, almost regardless of what they actually do – in this case because many are structurally reliant on police across a number of dimensions. Such individuals are motivated to legitimize the particular (existing) set of power relations within which both they and the police are embedded in order to ameliorate their sense of dependence and insecurity. That is, at least, a guiding prediction of system justification theory (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Jost et al. 2004; Kay et al. 2008).

This paper focuses on and extends one aspect of this debate, which stems directly from the empirical notion of legitimacy described above. Legitimacy is based in an important sense in 'right behavior', but it may also serve to 'make behavior right' (Gerber and Jackson, 2016). Legitimacy may thus shape attitudes inimical to normative concerns about fairness and promote support for an authority that is 'blind' to the moral or ethical content of its behavior. Moreover, the processes that produce and sustain legitimacy, particularly those associated with people's identity judgments, may also correlate with views on potentially problematic aspects of police behavior. And because it is inextricably linked with processes of group identification, police legitimacy may lead to other-directed forms of support for police as group authorities, which in turn may motivate the acceptance of malpractice against denigrated outgroups.

At the threshold, what follows provides a counterpoint to the argument that policing which transgressed norms of procedural fairness over the course of the latter 20th century led to significant institutional pressure and changed police organizations for the better. While policing has indeed changed, one could argue it has not changed very much, or not enough, and there appears to be a relatively high threshold for external pressure on police to 'kick in' and have an effect on police activity (Harkin, 2015; Loader and Mulcahy, 2003; Murray and Harkin, 2016). As well as being a story of change, the history of policing in Great Britain over the last four decades also provides the twin puzzles of why, given the revelation of a whole series of cases involving police malpractice, support for police did not collapse, and why current police organizations, and often personnel, remain essentially unchanged from decade to decade. One answer to these puzzles may be that significant sections of the population are forgiving of malpractice, and are motivated to support police despite sometimes egregious abuses of

power, because the legitimacy police command and the processes that sustain it encourage them to do so (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003).

Legitimacy and attitudes toward police use of force

The argument that legitimacy enables police action lies at the core of procedural justice theory. Many studies have considered the extent to which legitimacy, and associated aspects of people's experiences such as trust, encourage decision acceptance (Tyler & Huo, 2002), generate support for authorities (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003) and are intimately bound up with deference and compliance – and of course a common measure of legitimacy is people's sense that they feel a moral duty to obey the instructions of police officers (Tyler, 2006). On this account**,** people judge the activity of police and make inferences about the legitimacy the service commands. Legitimacy may attenuate and be withdrawn if those people find that police behaviour does not live up to widely accepted norms of fairness. Legitimacy is thus positioned as the outcome of social relations within which individuals and communities have agency and a reflexive ability to consider and act upon their experiences, judgements and feelings.

However, procedural justice is not the only factor shaping legitimacy, and indeed legitimacy (and the processes that sustain it) may have outcomes less socially desirable than compliance with the law or public cooperation with police. Why might legitimacy lead to people minimizing or explaining away police malpractice? One reason can be found in theories that stress the extent to which legitimacy involves authorization, or granting a power-holder the right to determine what is proper, desirable and the 'right' thing to do in a given context or situation. Indeed, an act might *become* the right thing to do when it is committed by a legitimate authority. This idea is most closely associated with the work of Herbert Kelman (1973; Kelman and Hamilton, 1989), who has argued widespread acceptance of violent acts can be explained when, and to the extent that, these are committed by authorities that command legitimacy among relevant populations:

> " … when acts of violence are explicitly ordered, implicitly encouraged, tacitly approved, or at least permitted by legitimate authorities, people's readiness to commit or condone them is considerably enhanced. The fact that such acts are authorized seems to carry automatic justification of them" (Kelman, 1973: 39).

Particularly pertinent is Kelman's argument that subordinates' justification of violence on the part of authorities is related to feelings of threat. When people feel threatened they are more likely to support violent action directed against the threatening party, since "the moral justification for violence depends on the extent to which it is related to the purpose of stopping aggression or neutralizing a threat towards one's self or … group" (Kelman, 1973: 34). David Garland (2001) and many others have described the extent to which the offender or 'criminal' has been positioned in precisely this light: as a more or less existential threat to the rest of the population and, moreover, part and representative of an "underserving underclass, locked into a culture and mode of life that is both alien and threatening" (2001: 135). While the fall in crime since the turn of the millennium may have made such stereotypes less immediately compelling, they appear to have lost none of their valence, particularly in relation to the putative existence of an irredeemable, criminal, *lumpenproletariat*. The legitimacy police command might therefore shape the extent to which forceful, aggressive or violent police action against members of this underclass – that is, offenders – is construed as justified or acceptable. It is telling in this regard that the first official response to an incident of police use of force is often an attempt to label the victim as an offender, as for example in the Mark Duggan case in London (the shooting of Duggan by police was the trigger for the 2011 riots – Bridges, 2012).

Indeed, in exploiting the contrast between unruly offenders and agents of social justice, violence itself might be recalibrated. Police and offender are placed at antithetical, even archetypal, odds, giving moral impetus to police conduct and enabling the use of force to be positioned as necessary in the service of the 'law-abiding' citizen. Moreover, this contrast between threat and protector may serve to produce a locus of ideas around which the 'respectable' majority can cohere in accounting for their *lack* of violent contact with police. That force is used rarely, discerningly, and against only a minority of citizens suggests there must be something exceptional or unique about those instancesn where it *is* used to warrant extreme measures (Berki, 1986). On this logic, culpability may be imputed to victims from the very fact of their victimization (Bandura, 1990). Police use of force, by contrast, may be seen not only as a final recourse, used when all other options have been exhausted and found to be ineffective, but also as a defensive *reaction*, compelled by provocation (ibid: 39). The power of police as legitimate 'namers' of problems (Loader and Mulcahy, 2001) may extend to an ability to assign the 'initial' instigation to violence to the non-police actor, vindicating the reasonableness of the police response and serving to obscure (if not entirely displace) causal agency from police and cast doubt on the faultlessness of the victim. Seen in such a light, violent police action might well be conceived as justifiable, not least because the agents enacting it are perceived as legitimate – i.e. as a positive moral force that serves to protect the 'law-abiding majority' against the criminal minority.

There are other reasons why people might accept or support the use of violence by an authority they perceive as legitimate. One idea is that is simply cognitively easier for people to believe that legitimate authorities always 'do the right thing'. Crandall and Beasley (2001: 79) draw on Heider to argue that we are "motivated to have an affectively uniform impression" of other individuals or organizations. People tend to avoid the cognitive difficulty associated with holding contradictory views by, for example, distorting memories of a person or agency if these contradict the uniformity of an impression. On this account those who believe that the police in a general sense share their own values will be reluctant to believe officers transgress those values. The reverse is also true, of course:

> "naïve [lay] psychology is tautological; bad actions indicate a bad person, and actions are bad when bad people perform them. The result is that if we have some reason to believe a person is an immoral or untrustworthy entity, then we tend to see all their actions, beliefs and values in a negative light" (Crandall and Beasley, 2001: 82)

A version of fairness heuristic theory may also be relevant here (van den Bos et al. 1997). On this account, people use process fairness as a heuristic for judgments about outcome fairness. They are often not in a position to judge whether the outcomes they receive at the hands of criminal justice actors are distributively or substantively fair, not least because they usually lack referent information (e.g. they will not know whether others in a similar position received similar outcomes). Process fairness, which people are more likely to have direct knowledge of, can stand as a substitute for, and indeed driver of, trust in the authority concerned, for example in relation to the outcomes it delivers, and motivate acceptance of its decisions.

Legitimacy may play a similar role in people's perceptions of criminal justice actors, particularly to the extent that it is based on a sense that police and police activity are broadly aligned with societal expectations regarding the appropriate use of power. In the absence of full information or knowledge about what transpired in a given situation, such beliefs may provide a heuristic upon which to base assessments of officer behavior. A strong sense of normative alignment with police, in particular, might encourage people to judge police actions as justified, even if they lack full knowledge, precisely because they believe in a general sense that the police 'do the right thing,' i.e.

act in ways that accord with societal expectations about the appropriate use of power (Jackson et al. 2012a, 2012b). Police themselves are reasonable, authorized, and legitimate, therefore police actions are reasonable, authorized, and legitimate. This is not to suggest a blind or uncritical deference to police authority, but is rather indicative of the privileged place police occupy in many social contexts and the extent to which police officers are imputed, by many, a certain technocratic benevolence: they are acting on society's behalf, in society's best interest. Actions are justified not merely as means to an end, but also because they are deeply embedded within an ideological tradition that couples policing with justice (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003). In evaluating police behavior, people may default to this basis of accepted legitimacy.

Procedural justice and group identity

Three reasons why legitimacy might promote acceptance of police use of force and/or malpractice were outlined above. It is equally likely, however, that some of the attitudes and processes that lead to or promote legitimacy might have the same effect. As the reference to fairness heuristic theory suggests, the perception that police generally act in a procedurally fair manner might be one factor: promoting legitimacy, a broader sense that the motives of the police are the correct ones, and the idea that officers make the right decisions for the right reasons. In this paper, though, we concentrate on the association between the legitimacy of the police, as representative of a particular social category, and the identity judgements of the policed. Does affiliation with particular social identities predict greater support for police activities?

Social identity is central to procedural justice theory. The core idea is that when people feel they share group membership with police, and believe that police are and behave as prototypical representatives of the group concerned, they are more likely to conceive as legitimate the position of the police within the group and the particular set of social relations that determine this position (Turner and Reynolds, 2010). In other words, when people categorize themselves as members of a social group to which they feel police also belong – and represent – they are motivated to support the police because they perceive the police to be legitimate authorities of that group.

On this account police behavior carries identity relevant information that people use to help constitute and shape their sense of self (Tyler and Blader, 2000, 2003). Broadly speaking, fairness indicates inclusion, status and belonging, thus strengthening shared group identities (between police and citizen, and possibly also between citizen and citizen) and therefore legitimacy (Bradford et al. 2014b, 2015). Fairness also indicates that police are behaving in morally acceptable ways and thus that they are valid and appropriate group representatives, and there is a reflexive aspect to this process. People judge police behavior against established norms of probity and fairness, and actively assess whether police can and should be considered representative of their group (Stott and Drury, 2000; Stott et al. 2012).

This line of thinking resonates strongly with the positioning of the British police as representatives of a social order closely associated with a particular vision of the nation state that harks back to an imagined post-war era of stability and cohesion (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003; Reiner 2010). Here, though, what the police do is rather less important than what they represent and their symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) to define respectability, belonging and membership (Waddington, 1999). People's reasons for feeling a sense of shared group membership with police are unlikely to be limited to perceptions of fairness/unfairness, and may instead relate in important ways to their wider sense of social and political embeddedness and affiliation.

Social identity is always based in distinction and in judgments about 'us' and 'them' (Turner and Onorato, 2010). While this process need not and does not inevitably lead to in group bias and discrimination against out groups (Spears et al. 2001), it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that under some conditions the extent to which people feel they share a group identity with the police will influence their propensity to

support police action against members of out groups – particularly relevant other(s) against which the group shared with police is defined. Premised on basic in-group solidarity and out-group prejudice, identity-related support may attach to the police irrespective of what they are doing and to whom.

These ideas seem particularly pertinent given that the identity most often associated with police, in the Anglophone world at least, is that of the nation, state and community, or more concretely, the 'law-abiding citizens' of these communities (Bradford et al. 2014b, 2015). Research using UK and Australian data has found consistent associations between this type of social identity and judgements about the fairness and legitimacy of the police. People who identify more strongly as law-abiding citizens tend to have experienced procedural fairness at the hands of officers, believe police are fair in a general sense, and grant more legitimacy. One relevant 'other' here is obvious: the 'non-law abiding citizen' or 'offender' (another may often be ethnic and other minority groups, particularly in contexts where ethnocentrism is strong and the police represent the dominant ethnic group). It may therefore be that the degree to which people identify as 'law abiding citizens' predicts support for aggressive police activity in relation to offenders.

Alternate explanations

Clearly there are many other potential reasons why people may or may not support police use of force. Silver and Pickett (2015: 653) distinguish between "utilitarian concerns" about crime, security and the control of deviance, and "symbolic beliefs" rooted in "long-term political orientations" (Tyler and Boeckmann, 1997: 163). The former seem to be only weak and inconsistent predictors of police use of force, as evidenced by Silver and Pickett's own analysis of the US General Social Survey. By contrast outgroup prejudice – as discussed above – and political ideology seem to to be consistent predictors of support for police use of force.[1] Notably, conservatives seem to be more supportive of police than those on the left/liberal end of the political spectrum. People high in social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism may also be more supportive of police use of force (Gerber and Jackson, 2016).

Hypotheses

The discussion above can be distilled into two hypothesis that will guide analysis. Hypothesis 1 is that those who grant the police more legitimacy will be more ready to support police use of force against offenders. Hypothesis 2 is that those who identify more strongly with a group the police might plausibly be said to represent – "the law-abiding citizen" – will be more likely to support police use of force against offenders

Data and methods

Participants and procedure

Data are drawn from a national probability sample survey of adults in England and Wales that was conducted as part of the Fiducia project (funded by the European Commission 7th Framework Programme: see www.fiduciaproject.eu). This was a telephone survey, with the sample generated using random digit-dialling, and the interview lasting on average twenty minutes (n=1,004). There was a typically low response rate for a telephone survey (6.3%). In the US, for instance, the average response rate for telephone surveys conducted by the Pew Research Centre – a research organization that is a reasonable comparator for the company that conducted the current study – decreased from 37% in 1997 to 9% in 2012 (Kohut et al. 2012; for more general trends see Tourangeau and Plewes, 2013). The situation in the UK is very similar (Curtice n.d.)

[1] Two other measures that Silver and Pickett (2015) included in their study, religious fundamentalism and 'gun culture', are not applicable in the UK context.

But because data are weighted to adjust for non-response and deviations from a representative sample, the sample hopes to reach towards a national sample for England and Wales. Post-stratification adjustment involved weighting respondents' responses based upon gender, age, ethnicity, education, income, region and primary language. We do, of course, acknowledge that the representativeness of our estimates is largely unknown. But we would like to stress two points. First, it has been shown that non-representative sampling methods can produce relatively accurate results with proper statistical adjustment (e.g. Wang et al. 2015). Second, when one is modelling estimated conditional correlations, as opposed to simple means or proportions in a particular population, the representativeness of the sample is arguably less important. By inferring to some sort of super-population rather than a finite-population, one is doing model-based rather than design-based estimation and inference. This view is typically adopted if the study has an analytic focus where one is interested in uncovering mechanisms/relationships that apply more generally, that relate to the data-generating mechanisms driving a particular phenomenon, than simply to a specific finite-population.

Constructs and Measures

Acceptability of police use of force (FORCE). To measure attitudes towards police use of force (our response variable) respondents were asked whether they thought it was acceptable for officers to use force in the following four scenarios (with the response alternatives ranging from 1=very acceptable to 4=not at all acceptable):

- Use deadly force against a person who is armed and believed to pose a threat to other people's lives
- Strike a citizen who uses his fists to attack the policeman
- Use physical force against an offender who is handcuffed and in police custody
- Use force to arrest an unarmed person who is not offering violent resistance

The scenarios therefore ranged from one in which it seems likely force would actually be justified (deadly force again armed threat) to one in which it would probably not (force in arrest of person not resistant). Two items refer to prima facie justified use of force, that is, and two to unjustified, and all relate to individuals implicitly or explicitly identified as a offenders. We acknowledge, however, that there is some ambiguity in the four scenarios, particularly the third and forth. The application of force is, at least in certain circumstances, permissible during the arrest of an unarmed person who is not offering violent resistance – for example if they are attempting to flee. The items do not provide sufficient information for respondents to make fine-grained decisions about the putative police actions concerned. What we are plausibly tapping into are, instead, respondents' 'gut reactions' to hearing about police use of force. It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that respondents will *typically* judge these latter scenarios as involving unreasonable use of force.

There are three main explanatory variables. Two are related to **Police legitimacy.** We differentiate between entitlement to be obeyed and the right to power (Jackson et al. 2012a; Tyler & Jackson 2013). To measure felt obligation to obey police authority (OBEY), respondents were asked:

> *Now some questions about your duty towards the police in the UK, where duty means you have a moral responsibility to obey the police. Using a scale from 1 to 7 where 1=not at all my duty and 7=completely my duty, to what extent do you feel it is your moral duty to…*

- … back the decisions made by the police because the police are legitimate authorities?
- …back the decisions made by the police even when you disagree with them?
- …do what the police tell you even if you don't understand or agree with the reasons?

To measure the right to power, respondents were asked to rate whether the police acted in ways that aligned with normative expectations regarding appropriate and desirable conduct (NORM):

- The police usually act in ways that are consistent with my own ideas of right and wrong.
- The police can be trusted to make the right decisions
- The police generally have the same sense of right and wrong as I do.

The response alternatives were: : (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither disagree nor agree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree.

The third explanatory variable was **Social identity** (ID). Respondents' social identitification was measured using four items:

- I see myself as a member of the British community
- It is important to me that others see me as a member of the British community
- I see myself as an honest, law abiding citizen
- It is important to me that others see me as an honest, law-abiding citizen

The response alternatives were 'not important at all', 'not very important', 'fairly important' and 'very important.'

Three further variables were included in the models in order to tap into aspects of the wider processes that generate legitimacy. First was **Procedural fairness** (PJ), which was measured by four items:

- Based on what you have heard or your own experience, how often would you say the police generally treat people in the UK with respect?
- (and) how often would you say the police try to do what is best for the people they are dealing with?
- About how often would you say that the police make fair and impartial decisions in the cases they deal with?
- And when dealing with people in the UK, how often would you say the police generally explain their decisions and actions when asked to do so?

The response alternatives were: (1) not at all often, (2) not very often, (3) fairly often and (4) very often.

The second additional variable was **Effectiveness** (EFF). Respondents were asked (using a scale from 1 to 7):

- … how successful do you think the police are at preventing crimes in the UK where violence is used or threatened? (1=extremely unsuccessful; 7=extremely successful)
- … how successful do you think the police are at catching people who commit house burglaries in the UK? (1=extremely unsuccessful; 7=extremely successful)
- If a violent crime were to occur near where you live and the police were called, how slowly or quickly do you think they would arrive at the scene? (1=extremely slowly; 7=extremely quickly)

Finally, we included a measure of **Political ideology** (LEFTRIGHT) based on a standard single indicator. This measure represents an important control variable in the analysis:

- In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". On a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=completely on the left and 7=completely on the right, where would you place yourself politically?

Descriptive statistics

The structure of the sample and descriptive statistics for key variables are shown in Appendix Tables 1 and 2. Note that respondents were much more likely to find police use of force acceptable in the first two scenarios than in the second two (Appendix Table 2). For example, 60% felt the use of deadly force against an armed threat was 'very acceptable'; by contrast, only 1% felt the same way in relation to the use of force to arrest an unarmed person who is not offering violent resistance. This would seem to support our claim, above, that the first two items refer to what many might consider the justified use of force, while the second two items refer, broadly speaking, to the apparently unjustified use of force.

Analytical strategy

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to estimate relations between constructs. We used MPlus 7.2 to do the analysis. Full information maximum likelihood estimation was used to take into account item non-response. Indicators were set as categorical where appropriate so as not to violate scale of measurement assumptions. The data do not permit causal inference. But by collecting data from a representative (weighted) sample, this method allows estimation of conditional correlations between latent constructs in the adult population of England and Wales.

The general model tested is shown in Figure 1. It reproduces one form of the basic procedural justice model, in that perceptions of police procedural justice and effectiveness are linked to legitimacy both directly and via the mediating construct of social identity (see for example Bradford et al. 2014b). Political ideology was added to this as a potential predictor of legitimacy (since conservatives seem to be more supportive of police) and of the ultimate outcome indicator acceptability of police use of force. Four separate models were estimated, one for each of the four use of force items.

Figure 1 near here

Results

Results from the SEMs are shown in Table 1. The approximate fit statistics indicate an adequate fit to the data in every case (Hu and Bentler 1999); the exact fit statistics (Chi-square) are typically ignored in such instances.

The most striking finding is that identifying more strongly as a 'law-abiding UK citizen' was consistently associated with greater acceptance of police use of force. Across all four scenarios, those who identified more strongly were more likely to support the police use of force as described in the vignettes. Hypothesis 2 was therefore supported by our data.

By contrast, legitimacy judgments had associations with some of the response variables but not others. Normative alignment was associated with the first and second scenarios but not the third and fourth. Given the first two vignettes represent situations where police use of force might plausibly be justified – although, of course, it might not, and the vignette does not provide conclusive detail one way or the other – it could indeed be that feeling the police share and act on appropriate norms and values acts as a heuristic, enabling judgements about the appropriateness of police action in a low

information environment or where there is uncertainty about what transpired. When the police action involved is more clearly 'wrong' (e.g. there are relatively few situations where use of physical force when arresting someone not offering resistance is justified), this aspect of legitimacy had no significant association with justification of police actions. Duty to obey had a significant association with only one of the response variables, 'Force on handcuffed offender'; conditioning on the other variables in the model, there was no association between perceived duty to obey the police and any of the other outcome measures. This finding is a little hard to explain, given the consistency of the other statistical effects, and it may be little more than a type I error. Hypothesis 1 was therefore only partially supported by the data – legitimacy was associated with attitudes toward police violence, but only in certain circumstances.

Table 1 near here

A further notable finding from the models shown in Table 1 is that while political affiliation had some association with attitudes toward police of force – those who placed themselves further to the right tended to be more supportive – this statistical effect was generally smaller and less consistent than that of the identity measure.

Finally, the indirect statistical effect of perceptions of or trust in police fairness on acceptance of the use of force is also worth noting. This was negative, and significant ($p<.05$) in all four models (average std. ß=-.15). People who believed that police were procedurally just tended to be more ready to accept the use of force. To investigate further all four models were re-estimated, this time allowing in each a direct path from trust in procedural fairness to the use of force variable. However this path was not significant in any model ($p>.10$ in every case): the influence of trust in procedural fairness on acceptance was entirely mediated by the legitimacy and identity measures, suggesting that our original model specification, shown above, was the correct one. Perceptions of procedural justice (which relate primarily to trust in the police) did not shape acceptance of force directly, but only via association with the legitimacy and social identity measures.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings reported above provide evidence for the idea that identifying with the police and social groups associated with police is linked to greater acceptance of the use of force. Recall that the survey items comprised very brief 'vignettes,' in which respondents were offered no contextualizing evidence. This, in turn, suggests that in ambiguous or uncertain circumstances people tend to default to identity judgments, inferring intentions and attributing causality according to the characteristics associated with a particular group (Hewstone and Jaspars, 1984). In order to make sense of the police use of force, people may interpret police behavior in light of shared group membership (Turner, 1984) – or the lack thereof. Those individuals who associate more strongly with the group police represent (who see themselves as 'law-abiding citizens') may be motivated to support police actions because they perceive police behavior through the lens of what they imagine to be common values and norms, and because they seek to sustain favorable self-concepts (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). 'Strong identifiers' are motivated to believe police do the right thing because this is in a sense to believe that they themselves do the right thing: sharing a group with police means also sharing norms and values. Conversely, those who identify less strongly with police may be more ready to be critical of police precisely because they are inclined to see police activity as indicative of *conflicting* norms and values, i.e. those of a group other than their own.

It is also likely that violence can shift people's sense that they share group membership with police. Hearing about or seeing unjustified acts of violence might lead people to infer that police do not share their values, encouraging a sense that police are

representatives of a group to which they would *not* want to belong (since its authorities behave badly) or, perhaps more likely, that police have lost their claim to represent the community of the law-abiding and indeed have excluded themselves from it. This suggests there are likely important feedback loops in the processes described in the paper, which cross-sectional data cannot address. This is a major limitiation to this study, and longitudinal and experimental research into these issues in the future would be most welcome.

That said, what has perhaps been captured best here is an insight into the way people process and react to stories about police violence in low information contexts (such as, for example, media reports). It is entirely plausible to suggest that they 'read' such stories in the light of their pre-existing opinions of, or relationships with, police, and judge the acceptability of police action accordingly. Social identity judgments – essentially, in-group favoritism – may be an important factor in sustaining wide public support for police in the face of behavior that might otherwise undermine it. There is likely a deductive element to this process, such that the characteristics of discrete individuals (i.e. police officers) are inferred from the attributes of a group as a whole (e.g., that the group, and the police as representatives of it, are legitimate, just and proper). There is also likely an inductive element, such that the defining characteristics of the groups involved are inferred from the typical or common attributes of group members/actions (i.e., because most police-public encounters are legitimate, police may be seen as legitimate) (Turner, 1984: 527). Social identity judgments and legitimacy may thus reproduce and sustain each other in a recursive cycle. While this paper has only touched the surface of the theoretical and practical implications of this process, it may go some way in accounting for the simultaneous, even complementary, existence of police legitimacy and malpractice.

However, it is important to note that legitimacy, as measured, does not appear to give police carte blanche. The findings here accord with those of Gerber and Jackson (2016), who draw a convenience sample of MTurk participants in the US, to find that legitimacy was associated with support for reasonable but not excessive violence (and, as mentioned earlier in the paper, that right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation were associated with support for excessive but not reasonable violence). The values people are thinking about when they assess the extent of normative alignment between themselves and the police, premised most importantly in notions of fairness, equity and respect (procedural justice), seem to impede acceptance of police actions that can more clearly be identified as wrong – but a sense of shared values may serve to reduce uncertainty when use of force appears justified. This highlights the complexity of people's relationships with the police. Procedural justice, for example, seems to be linked to both a broadly unquestioning support for the police, via social identity, and with a more value-based support, via normative alignment. Which of these processes is more important in a given context or situation may go someway to explaining why public assessments of police change, or remain stable, over time.

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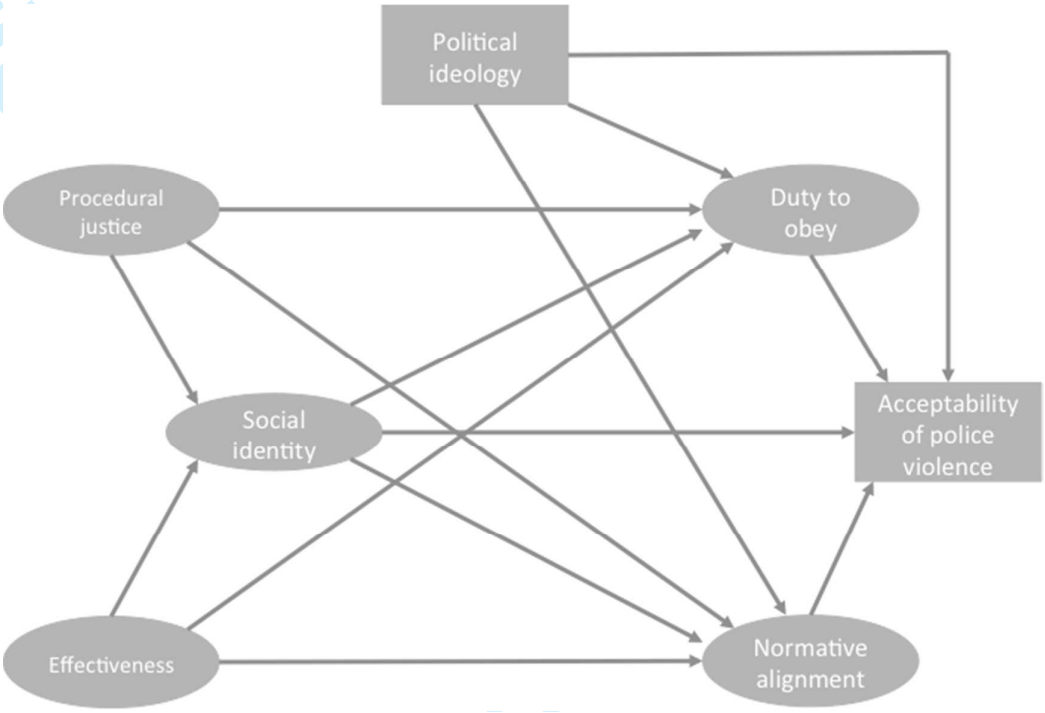
Table 1: Results from four SEM models predicting acceptance of police use of force against offenders

Response variables coded such that high=less acceptable

			Deadly force against armed threat	Stikes citizen who attacks	Force on handcuffed offender	Force in arrest of unarmed person
PJ	-->	ID	.264***	.263***	.246***	.245***
EFF	-->	ID	.057	.062	.085	.087
PJ	-->	OBEY	.233***	.233***	.237***	.242***
EFF	-->	OBEY	.215***	.213***	.210***	.203***
ID	-->	OBEY	.328***	.327***	.322***	.323***
LEFTRIGHT	-->	OBEY	.053	.055	.054+	.052
PJ	-->	NORM	.603***	.606***	.604***	.604***
EFF	-->	NORM	.124**	.120**	.127**	.127**
ID	-->	NORM	.115**	.111**	.107**	.108**
LEFTRIGHT	-->	NORM	.067*	.069*	.068*	.066*
ID	-->	FORCE	-.289***	-.114*	-.164**	-.173**
OBEY	-->	FORCE	.086	.047	-.163*	-.017
NORM	-->	FORCE	-.142**	-.186**	-.042	-.059
LEFTRIGHT	-->	FORCE	-.038	-.092*	-.003	-.087+
PJ	<-->	EFF	.611***	.611***	.611***	.611***
PJ	<-->	LEFTRIGHT	.129**	.130**	.129**	.128**
EFF	<-->	LEFTRIGHT	.081*	.076+	.083*	.088*
OBEY	<-->	NORM	.415***	.418***	.417***	.418***
ID	<-->	LEFTRIGHT	.227***	.228***	.228***	.228***
Chi2			362.0	380.0	384.8	371.6
DF			117	117	181	117
p-value			<.0005	<.0005	<.0005	<.0005
RMSEA			0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05
CFI			0.98	0.98	0.98	0.98
TLI			0.97	0.97	0.97	0.97

*** p<.001; ** p<01; * p<.05; + p<.1

Figure 1: General form of model tested



Appendix Table 1: Structure of the sample

	Percentages		
Age		**Employment status**	
18-24	*13*	Full-time employee	*33*
25-34	*13*	Part-time employee	*13*
35-44	*9*	Self-employed	*12*
45-54	*20*	Unemployed	*4*
55-64	*20*	Student	*5*
65-74	*17*	Retired	*27*
75 and over	*8*	Other	*5*
Gender		**Highest qualification**	
Female	*47*	Degree-level	*42*
Male	*53*	Below degree level	*45*
		No qualifications	*12*
Ethnic group			
White British	*88*	**Political affiliation** (7-point scale)	
Any other	*12*	Left (1-3)	*30*
		Centre (4)	*37*
Area type		Right (5-7)	*34*
Urban	*75*		
Rural	*26*	Unweighted n (=100%)	1,004

Note: Totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Appendix Table 2: Variables for analysis

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Latent variables				
Procedural justice	-0.02	0.73	-2.60	1.56
Effectiveness	0.00	0.96	-2.89	2.42
Duty to obey	-0.01	1.23	-3.78	1.96
Normative alignment	-0.01	0.64	-2.17	1.27
Social identity	-0.03	0.41	-1.55	0.86
Attitudes toward police use of force				
Deadly force against armed threat	1.49	0.69	1	4
Stikes citizen who attacks	1.95	0.95	1	4
Force on handcuffed offender	3.37	0.84	1	4
Force in arrest of unarmed person	3.62	0.64	1	4

Table 1: Results from four SEM models predicting acceptance of police use of force against offenders

Response variables coded such that high=less acceptable

All other variables coded such that high='more'

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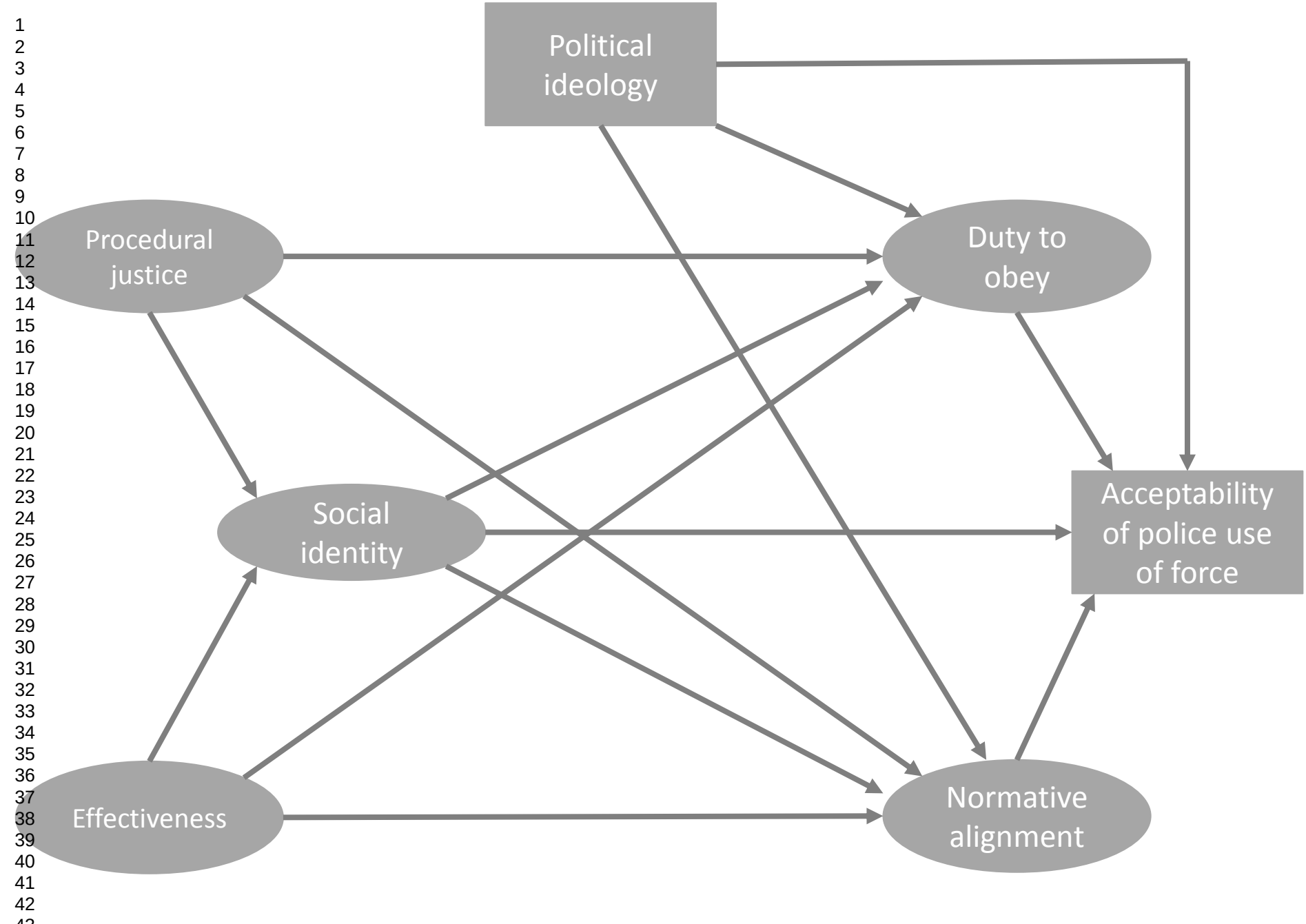
Political ideology
Procedural justice
Duty to obey
Social identity
Acceptability of police use of force
Effectiveness
Normative alignment