Respect My Authority

Keyaisha Nicole Thomas, Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Christopher Faircloth, Sociology

Abstract
There is no shortage of literature about the relationship of minority race groups and figures of authority, in particular the police. This study seeks to find an understanding as to why this relationship exists and what factors contribute to the negative feelings toward the police. This study consisted of 30 college students (26 females and 4 males) that were solicited by flyers in the conference room of the psychology department at Xavier University of Louisiana. It was hypothesized that minorities who were exposed to negative encounters in a school setting or live in an area with high crime would have a more negative disposition towards the police. A Pearson’s correlation was used as the analysis.

Key Terms:
- Race
- Policy Brutality
- Authority
- Crime
- Punishment
- Crime

Keyaisha Thomas is Psychology major with a minor in Sociology from Amite, LA. After graduation in May 2015, Thomas plans to obtain a master’s in forensic psychology with the option to become a licensed professional counselor. Ultimately, Thomas plans to obtain a Ph.D. in higher education, specifically in student affairs so she can help increase diversity. Her research interests include forensic psychology, the school to prison pipeline, African Americans and the media, race, class, and gender.
Imagine walking in the mall enjoying a Saturday afternoon, when suddenly a scene begins to draw attention. Out of the corner of one’s eye a police scene is unfolding. A young African American male is surrounded by police officers. At this moment many scenarios may come to an individual’s mind. The young man could be a troublemaker. The police could be racially profiling this young man because of his race or appearance. Maybe, the young man and the police know each other and are catching up. Whatever the situation may be, simply seeing a minority and an authority figure tends to raise some sort of suspicion. What is the reason for the suspicion? There is no shortage of literature about the relationship between minorities and figures of authority, but where did this pattern start? There are many questions that can be asked about minorities and figures of authority. This study tries to dig deeper into these topics and uncover the answer to some of these questions.

Dahlke (1952) describes race riots, the cause of race riots, and the roles of the authority figures and the subordinate group. Dahlke describes two different race riots, the Kishinew riot of 1903 and the Detroit Riot of 1943. My focus is geared towards the Detroit riot because it deals with African Americans and authority figures. Dahlke says that the role of the authority figure was to make the subordinate group feel less than a first class citizen. The role of the subordinate group is to struggle for subsistence. In both riots the police seemed to “turn the other cheek” when the majority would be assaulting the minority group. In some cases the police would be participants of the riots. In the Detroit case, when the police decided to make efforts at controlling the riots, they would direct their attention towards the African Americans. During this time period the many African American arrests and unfair treatment by police caused both the figures of authorities and the minorities to develop attitudes of suspicion and fear towards one another.

Many factors contributing to the pattern between minorities and authorities may go back to a historical standpoint; however, age and contact with police can also be factors. For a minority child, a situation with an authority figure can be life changing. This is one way a minority’s view can be altered as an adult. Crystal, Killen, and Ruck (2010) demonstrated that the older children are, the more likely they are to feel as though they have experienced some unfair treatment by authority and racial exclusion by peers. The study consisted of fourth, seventh, and tenth graders. In the study the students were given scenarios and then questioned about how they felt about each scenario. One example was when two young European American girls did not invite an African American girl to eat lunch with them. Both of the European American girls liked sports and it was rumored that the African American girl did not. Younger kids did not think it was a racial issue. This could be because at their age they may not have experienced any incidents of racism, and if so they probably did not realize it. During the time of middle childhood and middle adolescence attitudes towards authority figures and relationships with authority figures change drastically. Studies show that older students tend to be more aware of discrimination than younger students (Fisher, Jackson, & Villaruel, 1998). Conflict with authority also tends to increase. According to Smetana (1995), various cognitive capacities such as abstract thinking and moral reasoning show significant advances during this period, increasing the likelihood that older relative to younger youth will question and challenge authority.

School is known as a place of learning, but one does not always learn textbook material. How children perceive the environment they are in plays an important role in development. If a
minority child has a racial incident at school and
the authority figure encourages it or “sweeps it
under the rug” it can cause the child to have a
negative disposition towards authority. Varma-
how minority students in Canada feel about
racism in a school setting and the authorities’
role. In the study the authority figures did not see
racial slurs and name calling as something
serious. However, if the minority retaliated
violently, the authority figure suddenly wanted
to discipline the minority student. As with the
race riots described by Dahlke (1952) the
authority figure took the side of the majority.
Ruck and Wortley (2002) show that minority
male students are more likely to be disciplined at
school. Their study examined differential
treatment relating to school disciplinary
practices. In the study children of different ethnic
backgrounds were asked how they felt about
teacher treatment, school suspension, and police
treatment towards their race and towards other
races. In each category of disciplinary practices,
African Americans scored the highest in
perceiving differential treatment as well as
discrimination. The other groups felt as though
African Americans received differential
treatment from teachers, got suspended more,
and the police treated them more unfairly than
other races. It is one thing for children to
perceive that they are being treated different, but
it is a totally different thing when students of
other races take notice of the change too. Skiba,
Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) also did a
study on school punishment and disproportional-
ity. Punishments included
referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. The rank
order for punishment went from males to
females with African American males being first
and Caucasian females ranking last. In this study
as well as the study of Ruck and Wortley (2002)
students felt as though a European American and
African American child could do the same thing
and the African American child would receive a
worse punishment. The minority males also felt
as though the police were in school to control
and supervise the behavior of their racial group.
All of these factors can contribute to an
individual’s view of authority figures.

Other factors to keep in mind in dealing
with the relationship between minorities and
authorities are location, contact with each other,
and how each side feels about the relationship.
All these factors can affect the future relationship
between the two. Fitzgerald and Carrington
(2011) investigated disproportionate minority
contact and the police. Disproportionate minority
contact can be due to differential treatment,
differential involvement and disproportionate
risk factors. The study showed that certain
factors of minorities tend to put them at a greater
risk for encountering an interaction with an
authority figure. Most of the factors are things
that minorities have no control over such as
gender, their place of residence, and race. In the
criminal justice system, minorities are
disproportionately represented as victims,
suspects, and defendants at every level (Chiricos,
Welch, & Gertz, 2004).

All these factors lead to an even more
negative relationship. A side I have yet to
consider is that of the police. Allen (2005) shows
the opposite side of the coin. His study discusses
police taking juveniles into custody. He gives
different reasons as to why a juvenile may be
taken into custody. Gender, attitude, and the
demeanor of a juvenile play important roles in
deciding whether or not they should be taken
into custody. Tyler (2001) discussed public trust
and confidence and how authorities treat the
public. Minorities are very distrusting of
authority for various reasons ranging from
personal experience to attitudes and even racism
(Miller 2010).

In Tyler’s (2001) study both the majority
and the minority group rated the police on their
attitudes towards the individual. If people felt
that the police was sincere, fair, and just and didn’t harass others, the people were more supportive of the authority figure. People who lived in or near areas where the crime rate was high tended to want more from the police. They wanted to be sure that they were safe when they leave the house at night or go for a run in the morning. People exposed to crime so frequently want a sense of security (Miller 2010).

I stated earlier that many factors can contribute to the relationship between minorities and authorities, especially age and contact. Dottolo and Stewart (2008) conducted a study on older people and their view on race, class, and the police. When asked about their views on race African American males all had a story relating to a police encounter. That was not the case for the European American males. Clearly there is a difference in police treatment and race as well as gender. Minorities and authority tend to have a more negative relationship and can be attributed to many factors such as contact, location, age, and even historical factors. I hypothesize that minorities who live in areas with higher crime rates, or who have had negative encounters with authority figures at a school setting will have a more negative disposition towards the police than minorities who live in areas with lower crime rates and who have not had negative encounters with authorities at a school setting.

**Method**

**Participants**

The students participants were solicited with flyers posted in the conference room of the psychology department at Xavier University of Louisiana. The flyers informed the students of the location, time, and a brief description of the study. The age of the participants ranged from college freshman to college seniors, but was not limited to that population. All majors were welcome to participate. The participants were compensated for their time by some form of course credit.

**Materials**

Participants completed three scales of measurement each containing Likert-type responses. Chow’s (2010) Perceptions of the Police scale consisted of eight questions on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There were two sub-sections of this scale: perceptions of the police and overall satisfaction with the police. Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item from the perceptions of the police sub-section is “The police will only use lawful means to combat crime.” The second scale was an adapted version of Tyler’s (2001) High Crime Measure which consisted of five questions on a 2-point scale. The final measure was Ruck and Wortley’s (2001) Perceptions of Differential Treatment and General Perceptions of the School Environment. Perceptions of differential treatment consist of teacher treatment, school suspension, use of police at school, and police treatment at school which consisted of Likert-type responses. General perceptions of the school environment consisted of intergroup association, school violence, and severity of school punishment which consisted of Likert-type responses. An example of these items is: “Do you think students from your racial group are more likely to be suspended than students from other racial groups for engaging in the same types of behavior.”

**Procedures**

The participants were greeted as soon as they entered the room. They were able to sign their name for any form of course credit that they would receive. As they entered the room I handed out an informed consent paper. I asked that they read it to themselves as I read aloud for clarification purposes. I reinforced how this study was completely voluntary and that they could leave whenever they liked. I went around
individually to personally collect each form and place them into a pile. Then I read the directions for the questionnaires and let the participants fill them out. The participants were asked to fill out three questionnaires; Chow’s (2010) Perceptions of the Police Scale, Tyler’s (2001) High Crime Measure, Ruck and Wortley’s (2001) Perceptions of Differential Treatment and General Perceptions of The School Environment and some demographical information. As students finished, I collected their questionnaires and put them into a separate pile. As I collected each questionnaire I thanked participants for their time and input. Then I provided them with a debriefing form that let them know the purpose of the study and where to seek counseling if they need it.

Results

The hypothesis of this study is that minorities who live in areas with high crime or who have had negative experiences with an authority figure at the school environment will have a more negative disposition towards the police. The study had a sample size of 30 participants, with the majority (26) being female and the rest being male (4). Two Pearson correlations and one Spearman correlation were run on the data set. The first correlation was between high crime and perception of the police; \( r (30) = -0.304, p = 0.051 \). The correlation demonstrated that the relationship between high crime and perception of the police was negative and not very strong. Thus it cannot be concluded that if an individual is exposed to higher levels of crime that their perception of the police will increase. The second correlation was between school experience and perception of the police; \( r (30) = -0.143, p = 0.225 \). This correlation demonstrated that the relationship between school experience and perception of the police was negative and also not strong. Thus it cannot be determined that an individual’s negative school experiences will determine their perception of the police. The third correlation was run exclusively with females. This correlation showed that in terms of school experience and perception of the police, \( r (26) = -0.288, p = 0.077 \) and in terms of high crime and the perception of the police, \( r (26) = -0.286, p = 0.078 \). Although this correlation was also weak and negative, it had a higher correlation between school experience and perception of the police. All of these correlations were conducted with a \( p \) value of .05 or lower. None of the above results showed any significance.

Discussion

As stated earlier there is no shortage of literature about the relationship between figures of authority and minority race groups. One cannot conclude what factors hinder nor help this relationship. Many variables have to be taken into context when drawing a solid conclusion. With that being said, the research for this topic continues to try to explain at least a fraction of what factors may help try and understand this relationship.

The hypothesis was not supported. Results showed that none of the data was significant. Therefore one cannot conclude that there is a relationship between school experience, high crime, and the perception of the police. Although the relationship between high crime and perception of the police was marginally significant with a \( p \) value of .051, results failed to show that people who live in high crime areas and who have had negative experiences in the school setting tend to be more negative towards the police. The results also failed to confirm that people who live in low crime areas and have not had negative school experiences tend to have a positive disposition. There was a difference when it came to gender and these correlations. The Spearman correlation consisted of females only. The \( p \) value was significantly lower (\( p = 0.077 \)) and the correlation
coefficient (-.288) was higher for the correlation of school experience and the perception of the police. If this data was significant it would have followed the path of previous research by saying that there is a gender difference in school punishment and experience.

This research has followed the pattern of previous research, by examining that there is a relationship between minorities and authorities. This research was conducted to find out if certain factors such as crime and school experience contribute to a person’s disposition towards the police. There were some limitations to this study. One limitation to this study was the overwhelming female to male ratio. There was no way to tell if the differences between the groups were significant because females had a larger response rate than males. Even when the males were taken out of the data there was a difference, but it was not significant. Another limitation to this study was the population. The population for this study consisted of strictly African Americans. Because the sample size all belonged to one group there was no comparison group. There was no way to tell a difference between groups. There were not any other minority groups to compare and contrast. This was a major limitation. There was no way to see if minority groups differed on the perceptions of the police. I would have liked to do a lot with the comparison and contrasting of the different minority groups and the different gender views of each minority group. Another limitation was the time restraints. There were only three sessions of the study. During these times other students had studies going on as well, and some students had class. It was hard trying to find a time to fit everyone’s schedule. Because of my own personal schedule I believe if I would have had different times then maybe I would have had a bigger sample size and the results could have been significant. An important limitation to keep in mind was the location of the flyer. Although the flyer did not leave anyone out, it targeted certain students in particular. I believe if the studies were to be announced around the entire campus the male ratio would have definitely increased as well as the participant rate in general. This would give students of different majors and ethnicities a chance to participate. Another limitation could be the interchangeable nature of the terms “authority figure” and “police.” Although police are not the only figures of authority that garner mistrust, the relationship between the two seems to be more prevalent.

Conditions were kept constant throughout each study. Each participant received an informed consent followed by a questionnaire. Then they were debriefed and they signed for course credit. A confounding variable could be the participants’ previous beliefs of the police. Another confounding variable could be the region the individual is located in. Certain areas have a higher history of distrust when it comes to figures of authority and minority contact. Social desirability as well as acquiescence could be potential issues when dealing with a research survey. The research for this topic is ongoing and becoming more interesting every day. For future implications I suggest a more hands on approach with this topic. For example, a police officer could live in the life of a minority for a day and see what it feels like. Also, there could be a counseling session for troubled youth and police officers and each could discuss how they feel about the opposite party and why. A more plausible solution could be police taking diversity courses that teach them how to interact with citizens from different backgrounds and ethnicities. Much of the confusion that occurs could be because of lack of understanding of one’s culture. With the increase in interest of police brutality and racial profiling, some type of intervention is needed to combat the root of the issue: lack of trust and respect between police and minorities.
References


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