

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND POLICE LEGITIMACY

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OVERVIEW

What is legitimacy?

Procedural justice and
other sources of
legitimacy

Is procedural justice a
universal norm?



WHAT IS LEGITIMACY?

“...a property of an authority or institution that leads people to feel that it is entitled to be deferred to and obeyed” (Sunshine and Tyler 2003: 514)

The right to: “enforce commands which cannot be countermanded, and to have a monopoly of such legitimate enforcement” (Barker 1990: 23)

Beetham (1991): Legitimacy is always granted on the basis of common shared values. Three dimensions must be fulfilled for a power to be considered legitimate:

- conformity to a set of rules;
- the justifiability of these rules in terms of shared beliefs;
- and the expressed consent of those governed or otherwise affected by the power.

MEASURING LEGITIMACY

Normative alignment

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the police in the UK:

- ... they usually act in ways that are consistent with my own ideas of right and wrong.
- ... can be trusted to make the right decisions
- ... stand up for values that are important to people like me.

Duty to obey

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?



JUDGEMENTS OF POLICE

Effectiveness

Distributive justice

Bounded authority

Procedural justice



PRINCIPLES OF PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Participation, openness and
explanation

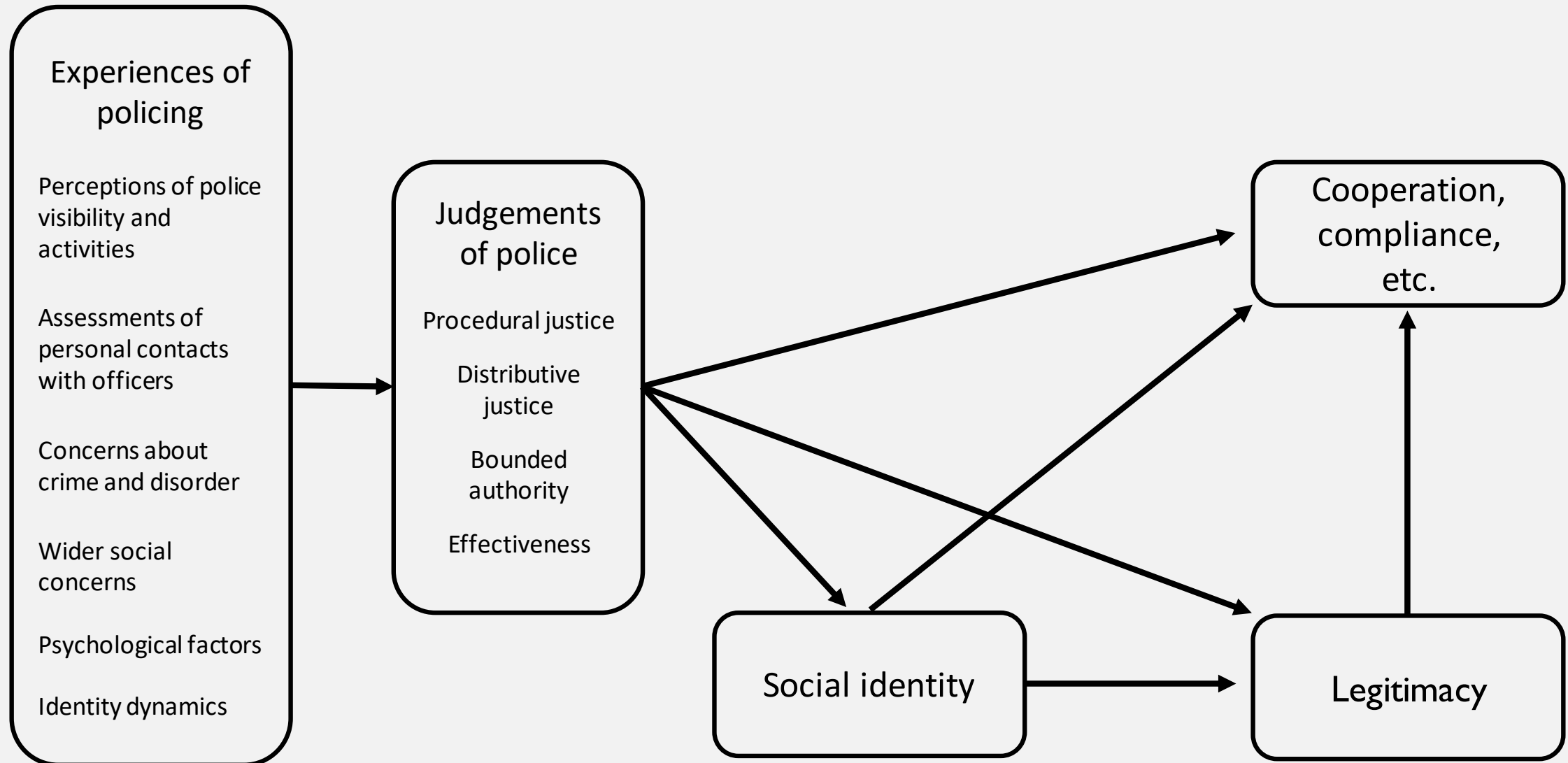
Fair, neutral decision making

Respect and dignity

A sense of trust in the decision
and the decision-maker (≠
making the 'right' decision)



A MODEL OF POLICE LEGITIMACY



SURVEY EVIDENCE FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

South Africa (nationally representative sample): procedural justice associated with legitimacy (but effectiveness more important)

Pakistan (probability sample from Lahore): procedural justice associated with legitimacy (but so was effectiveness)

Brazil (probability sample from Sao Paolo): procedural justice associated with legitimacy (effectiveness much less important)

Some divergence from this pattern, e.g. Justice Tankebe's work in Ghana, but Walters and Bolger's 2019 systematic review concluded that location (North America vs. Europe vs. rest of the world) did not moderate the procedural justice → legitimacy pathway



THE 'UNIVERSALITY' OF PROCEDURAL JUSTICE?

Procedural justice seems to be a fundamental norm against which police are judged

A norm is “a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behaviour” (Merton)

Group membership is thus central to how we (academics and ‘the public’) think about legitimacy

So one implication is that procedural justice is a norm of very many social groups ...

COMPLEXITIES AND CHALLENGES

Perceptions of **corruption** – most evidence suggest this is important, but any association with legitimacy is largely mediated by procedural justice, effectiveness etc.

Strong suggestion that a **baseline of effectiveness** is needed for the procedural justice
→ legitimacy path to truly 'emerge'

The role of factors only loosely (or un-) related to **police activity** - e.g. trust in government, group identity/conflict etc.

In contexts with ineffective and/or corrupt and/or repressive police organisations, is **incremental change** to procedural justice viable or even conceivable?

THANKS FOR
LISTENING!

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