Published in final edited form as:

Drugs (Abingdon Engl). 2017 ; 24(3): 248–255. doi:10.1080/09687637.2016.1239697.

“Get Off Me”: Perceptions of Disrespectful Police Behavior among Ethnic Minority Youth Gang Members

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Abstract

Recent media accounts have highlighted issues of use and abuse of police force and policing practices targeted at ethnic minorities within inner city areas. To date, little research has focused specifically on the experiences and perceptions of youth gang members in dealing with police. Using data from 253 in-depth interviews with ethnic minority San Francisco-based youth gang members, we examine perceptions of respectful and disrespectful police behavior. Premised on a procedural justice model (Tyler, 2006), we explore how frequently disrespectful police behavior is reported and how these negative experiences shape gang members’ attitudes towards the police more generally. We refine our investigation by comparing adverse encounters to examples in which gang members are treated respectfully. Using a data-driven inductive and qualitative theory testing deductive approach, our data revealed that male and female gang members regularly experience disrespectful police behavior in terms of physical and verbal abuse. Our findings indicate that these exchanges contribute to negative attitudes, fear, and distrust of police, while respectful interactions are meaningful and can contribute to positive attitudes towards officers.

INTRODUCTION

Policing gangs has been on the rise since the 1970’s and gang members tend to be the focus of aggressive anti-gang policing strategies (Katz and Webb, 2006). This is especially true in California where anti-gang policing strategies implemented arguably set the national standard (Katz and Webb, 2006). In general, studies have found that gang unit officers target individuals based on their age, race, gender, clothing, and neighborhood context (Durán, 2008; Katz and Webb, 2006). Furthermore, there has been evidence of excessive use of force, abuse of authority and disrespect during gang member-police interactions (Durán, 2008).

As literature illuminates, disrespectful encounters and experiences with officer use and abuse of force are extremely problematic (see Geller and Toch, 1996). These interactions include

physical harm but also use of force has contributed to minorities, especially young men of color, holding comparatively more negative opinions about police (Brown and Benedict, 2002; Durán, 2008). Specifically, excessive use of force can contribute to the perception that officers are racially biased against people of color and ineffective at their job (Flanagan and Vaughn, 1996). It can contribute to a lack of confidence in law enforcement, the questioning of their integrity (Durán, 2008; Flanagan and Vaughn, 1996) and loss of faith in their legitimacy more generally (Tyler, 2006). It is therefore important to investigate perceptions of disrespectful police behavior among ethnic minority youth.

In response, the present study utilizes interviews of San Francisco-based drug dealing gang members and examines experiences and perceptions of respectful and disrespectful police behavior. Premised on a procedural justice model (Tyler, 2006), we explore how frequently disrespectful police behavior is reported by the men and women, the nature of the physical and verbal disrespect experienced and how law enforcements' behavior may be shaped by the study participants' criminal involvement. We examine how these negative experiences contribute to attitudes towards the police more generally and we refine our investigation by comparing adverse encounters to examples in which gang members are treated respectfully.

Procedural Justice and Legitimacy

Procedural justice literature indicates that individuals comply with law enforcement when they are perceived as legitimate authority figures worthy of compliance (Hinds and Murphy, 2007; Murphy and Cherney, 2012; Murphy, 2009; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006). Legitimacy can be defined as "a property of an authority that leads people to feel that the authority or institution is entitled to be deferred to and obeyed" (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003:514). Research has found that law enforcement may be most likely to establish legitimacy and a mutually beneficial relationship between citizens and police by acting procedurally just (Tyler, 2006; Tyler and Huo, 2002). Tyler (2006) identified four process-based criteria that citizens use to measure the presence or absence of procedurally just police behavior: voice, fairness, trust, and respect. While the four components are typically examined together, the present study will focus on respect.

Citizens put great importance on the degree of politeness and respect experienced during face-to-face encounters with police. People are likely to feel disconnected from legal actors who treat them rudely or with indifference toward their rights. Perceptions of police respect, especially when manifested as use and abuse of force, can shape an individuals opinion about police (Flanagan and Vaughn, 1996). Specifically, perceptions and experiences, including vicarious experiences, of police disrespect can contribute to a lack of confidence in police effectiveness, perceptions of officer racism and deceit and general concerns about police brutality (Flanagan and Vaughn, 1996; Locke, 1996). It is important to note that some research suggests that perceptions of procedural justice may not extend to minority groups and instead, may primarily apply to majority groups (Murphy and Cherney, 2011). However, other works have found the opposite suggesting that perceptions of procedural justice, especially procedural fairness, are critical to minorities' positive or negative opinions of police, the degree of support awarded to officers and their legitimacy more generally (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2003; Tyler and Wakslak, 2004). Thus, perceptions and

experiences of respectful police behavior are critical to mitigating negative attitudes towards law enforcement and establishing police legitimacy among different groups (Tyler, 2006).

Police Behavior and Perceptions of Respect

During police-citizen points of contact, police are expected to treat all individuals with politeness and use of force should be in proportion to each unique situation (Keiling, 2014). However, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests some populations, such as minority males, may not experience respectful police conduct as frequently as others (Brunson, 2007; Durán, 2008; Fratello, Rengifo, and Trone, 2013; Gau and Brunson, 2007; Lopez, 2010). Instead, they may be more likely to experience racially motivated police behavior and discourteous interpersonal treatment (Durán, 2008). This includes minority populations being subject to physical harm at the hands of police. The most extreme example of this is police shootings, where minorities are disproportionately the victims (Chevigny, 1995; Fyfe, 1988; Lee, 2004).

In addition, racially motivated disrespectful police behavior may be found in routine patrol practices (Lopez, 2010). For example, the use of stop, question, and frisk practices often raises concerns about racism and abuse of force (Fratello et al., 2013). While these practices are argued to be important and effective crime-fighting tactics, they disproportionately target African Americans and Latinos and have yielded disappointing crime reduction results (Spitzer, 1999). They have also contributed to feelings of disrespect, criminalization, and distrust, and can result in the greater likelihood of non-cooperation with police (Brunson, 2007; Fratello et al., 2013; Gau, 2013). This may be due to minority populations' experiences during these types of encounters. Specifically, minorities report being subjected to verbal threats and/or physically aggressive behavior including officers putting their hands on them, forcing them to the ground, being pushed up against a wall, having their arms twisted, having a weapon drawn, being sworn at (Fratello et al., 2013), and/or being handcuffed too tightly (Keiling, 2014).

While aggressive police behavior may be motivated by racial biases (Chevigny, 1995; Lee, 2004), it is also important to consider that some officers may use force in situations where they feel their authority is being threatened (Chevigny, 1995; Keiling, 2014; Wilson and Moore, 2009). From some officers' perspective, "legitimate questioning of the use of that authority is interpreted as illegitimate interference with legitimate police activity" (Keiling, 2014: 90). Officers may have a desire to punish and "teach a lesson" when they perceive being disrespected (Keiling, 2014:94, see also Toch, 1996), despite the questionable legality of their right to do so (Lopez, 2010). In such cases, officers may be less inclined to ignore obstinate, rude, or inflammatory remarks and arrest them, using force how they see fit (see Lopez, 2010; Wilson and Moore, 2009). While inappropriate use of force is extremely problematic, it is critical to note that the majority of officers have been found to respond appropriately in most situations (see Alpert, Kenney, and Dunham, 1997).

Attitudes Towards the Police

It is perhaps not surprising that routine and aggressive police practices in disadvantaged neighborhoods result in perceptions and experiences of harassment (Brunson, 2007) and

there is extensive evidence that groups that are the disproportionate recipients of police disrespect and misconduct are more likely to form negative opinions towards law enforcement (Mastrofski, Reisig, and McCluskey, 2002; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). This includes African Americans, especially young men, who have been found to view the police less favorably than Whites and other minorities in large part because they perceive racial disparities in police behavior (Brown and Benedict, 2002, Cheurprakobkit, 2000, Hurst and Frank, 2000; Lasley, 1994; Reisig and Parks, 2000; Thomas and Hyman, 1977; Warren, 2011; Weizer and Tuch, 1999; Weizer, 2000; Hurst et al., 2000).

Additionally, criminally and gang-involved individuals, also hold comparatively more negative opinions about law enforcement (Lee et al., 2010; Papachristos et al., 2012; Novich, 2015; Rios, 2011). This could be due to their experiencing deleterious police behavior, like physical and verbal disrespect and abuse (Durán, 2008; Nichols, 2010; Novich, 2014). Further, friends' and family members' beliefs and experiences with the legal system may vicariously impact an individual's view of the police (Papachristos et al., 2012). This may be especially impactful for gang members (Papachristos et al., 2012), as friends and family are often intertwined and/or the group may act as a pseudo family for its members (Klein and Maxson, 2006). This is problematic because direct and vicarious experiences with aggressive police behavior can contribute to negative attitudes (Papachristos et al., 2012), perceptions of distrust and fear of police (Flanagan and Vaughn, 1996), and trauma and anxiety among urban youth (Geller et al., 2014). Given that favorable attitudes towards law enforcement are the foundation of establishing legitimacy (Tyler, 2006), the perception of inappropriate use of force can contribute to a lack of legitimacy in officer authority (Keiling, 2014).

As the review of this literature suggests, perceived negative encounters with police marked by disrespect and abuse cause physical and emotional harm, which contributes to negative attitudes towards the police. Unfavorable opinions can then contribute to distrust of police and a weakening of law enforcements' legitimacy more generally (Tyler, 2006). To date, there is limited scholarship that directly measures how encounters, frequently characterized by use of force, shape young, criminally and gang involved ethnic minorities' attitudes towards the police. Given their criminal associations and ethnicity, they are at increased likelihood of coming in contact with police and being subject to or perceiving verbal abuse and disproportionate use of police force (Durán, 2008). The goal of this study, therefore, is to unpack gang members' perceptions of respectful and disrespectful police behavior, explore the nature of these exchanges, and illuminate how these interactions shape perceptions of police.

STUDY SETTING

The data were collected in The San Francisco Bay Area and the areas the subjects resided in typified highly segregated urban neighborhoods that resulted in social and economic isolation, extreme poverty, and high levels of violence. The Bay Area was also ethnically diverse allowing for an in-depth examination among different groups and had an active gang presence. According to California's official gang-member database, the study area had approximately 465 gang members in its system and there were approximately 80 gangs

operating in the Bay area (BII, 2010). At the time the data were collected, anti-gang efforts in California were robust (Katz and Webb, 2006). The state legislatures implemented the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP), Civil Gang Injunction (CGI) laws, and Proposition 21 (see Yoshino, 2008). California precincts also formed or expanded anti-gang units with police dedicated to monitoring, patrolling, and arresting individuals in high-gang areas (Katz and Webb, 2006).

METHODS

This investigation uses data from a federally funded research project on gender and drug sales. The data were originally collected between 2007 and 2009 and included men and women who self-identified as drug-dealing gang members. The research team partnered with community based organizations (CBOs) and invited gang involved youth to partake in the study. Additional data were collected via chain-referral sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Browne, 2005). The in-depth, one-on-one interviews had pre-coded quantitative and qualitative questions that captured socio-demographics and background data as well as data regarding the individuals' specific history including gang involvement and arrests. The interviews lasted approximately two hours and were held at various locations including libraries and youth centers. The interviews were primarily conducted in English and respondents were given a \$75 honorarium for their participation and an additional \$25 if they successfully recruited up to two additional interviewees. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a project staff member¹. To ensure anonymity, all respondents were assigned a pseudonym by the principal investigators.

The data included men (N=112) and women (N=137). The largest ethnic group was African American (54 percent, N=137) followed by Latino/a (primarily Chicano/Mexicano, but also including Central American) (27 percent, N=68). These groups were followed by Asian American or Pacific Islanders (API) (10 percent, N=25) and the sample included 17 individuals who identified as multi-racial, four Whites, and one that identified as Other. The respondents' age ranged from 14 to 39 years with the mean age being 21.6 years. The men and women's experiences with police seemingly differed. In all, 88 percent (N=105) of the men reported being stopped by police at least once with approximately a quarter of the men reporting being stopped 20, 30, or upwards of 50 to 100 times². The average number of stops per male was 9.6³ times. On the other hand, approximately 75 percent (N=100) of the females described experiencing at least one involuntary face-to-face contact with police. The vast majority reported being stopped one, two, or three times, with a smaller number (N=16) being stopped 10 times or more. The most number of encounters reported by one female was 30 stops with the average number of contacts per female being 4.5 times.

¹It should be noted there were some redaction challenges with the several of the transcriptions. There were two transcribers on the project and one in particular redacted their transcripts extensively. This rendered some portion of the data unreadable and unusable as details, specifics, or context of the interviews could not be established. This was not common and only impacted a small fraction of the entire dataset.

²One male respondent described being arrested 302 times of which 300 were for public intoxication. He described wanting to be arrested for public intoxication so that he could have somewhere, like jail, to sleep for the night.

³The male respondent who reported being arrested 302 times was omitted from the averages, given that he was an outlier. Including him, the average was 12.5 arrests per male respondent. His experiences were included in the analysis.

We first evaluated the data through a data-driven inductive strategy (Charmez, 2005) during which we coded for personal and vicarious experiences with police, prison, jail, or juvenile detention. Once coding was completed, it became apparent that a procedural justice theoretical framework (Tyler, 2006) might explain some of the themes in the data. To effectively use qualitative hypothesis testing, we employed a deductive strategy via a template approach and developed a coding manual around the procedural justice framework (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guilgun, 2011). While we focused on issues of respect, we used all four components of procedural justice theory to serve as codes in order to flesh out the salient themes: (1) *Voice* – the extent the gang members described engaging with the officer and/or expressed the ability to represent ones' situation/perspective when interacting with law enforcement, (2) *Fairness* – the degree to which law enforcement were described as making decisions founded in neutrality, objectivity, and factuality, (3) *Respect* – the degree to which law enforcement were reported as treating the gang members with respect, dignity, and politeness, and (4) *Trust* – the extent to which the gang members reported they felt they could trust that the authorities' motivations were sincere, compassionate, and/or well-intentioned. Once complete, the data were arranged into matrices as this ensured patterns, comparisons, trends, and deviant cases could be identified in an organized manner (Maxwell, 2005). We created quasi-statistical tables so as to generate numeric results based on the data (Maxwell, 2005). To be consistent with comprehensive data treatment (see Silverman, 2006), all cases were included.

It is important to note that there were certain limitations to consider. The patterns in the data are not necessarily representative of study participants' encounters with police given the nature of the data collection and the challenges with using secondary data (Smith, 2008). Though the data was of sufficient quality for this examination, the interviewers did not regularly ask salient follow up questions and this likely contributed to error patterns, bias in the data, and limited discussions on salient topics. Despite these limitations, concerns about respect and disrespect in a procedural justice context were raised organically, and relevant theoretical concepts emerged repeatedly, suggesting they were important aspects of the gang members' interactions with law enforcement.

RESULTS

According to Tyler (2006), people put great importance on the degree of politeness and respect afforded to them during face-to-face contacts with police. Individuals are likely to feel disconnected from authorities that treat them rudely and with indifference. The men and women in this sample raised concerns about respect and the quality of interpersonal treatment received from the officers. In all, 24 men (20 percent) and 22 (16 percent) women described experiencing, witnessing, or learning about respectful or disrespectful police behavior during involuntary stops. Though this may seem like a small percentage of the sample, it is important to note the men and women were not directly asked about respectful and disrespectful police behavior. Instead, these experiences were raised organically during discussions on other topics. As such, the numbers present in the study are estimates and it is likely that many similar experiences were not discussed (Slocum, Rengifo, and Carbone-Lopez, 2012). Had the interview guide asked specifically about these types of encounters, it

is likely that these numbers would have increased significantly on par with other research findings (see Fratello et al., 2013).

While several men and women described experiencing respectful interpersonal treatment, 21 men and 22 women described incidents where they were treated with what they perceived as disrespect or learned about disrespectful encounters experienced by others in their social networks. These concerns were primarily raised among African American (N=14, 24 percent) and Latino (N=10, 24 percent) men as well as African American (N=14, 18 percent) and Latina women (N=6, 23 percent), followed by one Asian and one multi-racial woman. No White study participants raised these concerns. Though the respondents acknowledged that they risked being detained by police due to their involvement in illegal activities and/or as a result of aggressive anti-gang law enforcement strategies, they still stressed the importance of being treated with respect by police. As Diego explained:

I respect [gang task force and narcotics police] but if they want to come disrespecting, I don't give a fuck if you are a cop. That's my family. You can't come over here and disrespect them. I don't care if you got a badge, we are all human....Don't come disrespecting just because you got a fucking badge and you are going to come pushing around and shit. You going to come and respect the family.

Disrespect as Disproportional or Inappropriate Use of Force

Concerns about disrespectful treatment were typically identified as disproportional or inappropriate use of force during a stop (Flanagan and Vaughn, 1996). Indeed, it was the disproportionality of use of force, which often caused bodily harm, that signaled a lack of respect among youth in the study (Kleinig, 2014). These concerns were discussed by 16 men (13 percent) and 18 women (13 percent). Perceptions of disrespect occurred both in the context of stops deemed legitimate (i.e. police encounter as a result of criminal behavior) and those deemed illegitimate (i.e. police encounter not perceived as justified). Excessive use of force included experiencing, witnessing or learning about the police forcefully stopping someone via “throwing”, “slamming”, or “grabbing” individuals as well as shoving, beating, or handling people roughly. Dennis, for example, recalled how the police treated him with disrespect by hurting him when they arrested him for fighting during school. He remembered that the handcuffs were extremely tight and the officers roughly placed him in the police car: “They had me in handcuffs tight as fuck. So tight that you could see the marks around my wrists and they had me in the car scuffed up.” The over tightening of handcuffs has been found to be inappropriate and viewed as excessive use of force by officers as it can be painful and injurious (Kleinig, 2014). Nenah, a female gang member, also described being physically hurt and disrespected by the officers during her interaction. She was in a fight with another girl and when the police came, they were rough enough to mark her skin: “Police was trying to grab me off her [but] I wouldn't let her go or nothing. And then they had picked me up and slammed me on the ground. That's how I got marks all over here.” For three men, disproportional use of force and disrespect was having weapons drawn on them in a threatening manner during a police encounter. Again, it was the perceived disproportionality of the officers' behavior that was problematic. Maurice, for example, recalled:

I got in a truck to make a sale...nobody [was] in there but one person. But when I had got my dope out to sell [to] the dude...something happened. Mysteriously, a lotta people jumped [in to the]...back o' the truck....I was only 17 with just like seven guns pointed to my head.

While some (N=7) described disrespectful interactions during seemingly unjustified police encounters and indeed, this was raised more so among the men (N=5) than women (N=2), the majority (N=27) indicated that these experiences happened when they or someone they knew was approached during a stop they considered legitimate: on suspicion of a crime or as a result of their involvement in a crime – most commonly, drug dealing⁴. Greg, for instance, described a drug-related arrest that stood out in his memory. He felt the police were disrespectful by being excessively physical when he was stopped on suspicion of dealing, “I had a sack [of drugs] inside my drawers. Right when they said, “The police! The narcs!” I turned around and broke and fell....They jumped right on me....I tried to get up and they smashed me.”

Padrino, a Latino gang member, echoed this discourteous police behavior when he described his arrest after he sold drugs to an undercover officer: “I gave [the undercover officer] a twenty. [The] next thing I knew I was like turned around, a couple white dudes...they threw me down on the ground, they tried to beat me down.” Moreover, and strictly related to drug involved encounters with police, study participants described being choked by the officers when approached on suspicion of holding drugs in their mouth. Choking dealers was described as a law enforcement strategy to prevent sellers from swallowing drugs prior to arrest. Shannon, for example, explained how this practice made her fearful of the police: “I’m scared of [selling on a particular street]...[the police] do all kinda stuff to you...If [the police] see you...make a sale or anything, they gonna come choke you and sling you on the ground [and] have their knee all on your neck.”

Study participants explained that the rocks, if the police obtained them, could then be used as evidence against them. Despite their understanding of this, choking was perceived as disrespectful as it was described as an overly aggressive use of force, a violation of personal space, and physical attack on their person. Angelic, for instance, graphically described a time when the police attempted to catch her with crack rocks. While she managed to eventually swallow them, she commented on how aggressive and disrespectful the police were in trying to catch her with them: “[The police] hopped out the car. I tried to swallow [the rocks but] they got me by my face, my throat, back o’ my neck....They tried to make me open my mouth, but I just swallowed all my rocks.” Lisa’s account echoed Angelic’s discourteous encounter: “I had [the drugs] in my mouth and the police started trying to choke me out as soon as they got outta the car....I was swallowing it while they were trying to choke me.” Amber, likewise, recalled when the police stopped her while drug dealing and behaved in a way she found inappropriate – specifically calling attention to the physical harm the officer caused her: “[The police] hopped out [of their car], then choked me [and] damn near broke my arm.”

⁴This may be a result of the original focus of the study and had they been probed about more general crime involvement, it is possible additional situations may have been discussed.

While these accounts were of specific exchanges, a small number of study participants described inappropriate and disrespectful police behavior in more general terms. Mia, for example, lamented how law enforcement are “beating people or doing stuff they shouldn’t be doing to people.” For the few who spoke more generally, these perceptions were also connected more broadly to negative opinions about the police and a questioning of their behavior. Amber, for instance, spoke more generally about police use of force. For her, perceived disproportionate violence directly contributed to her having negative attitudes towards law enforcement: “[The narcotics police are] evil as hell....You’d think them motherfuckers [are trying to] save the world [and] help the people [but] they beat...the crap out the dealers.” Jin also complained about the general violence she witnessed and experienced, and connected these frustrations and the ability for police to behave disrespectfully due to a lack of accountability and oversight of officer discretion: “I’ve seen cops really beat the hell outta people....I’ve had a cop, you know, choke me....Like they get away with it, too, cuz they can do anything, they can say anything and get away with it.”

Disrespect as Verbal Abuse

In addition to physical abuse, a number of men (N=9) and women (N=11) described being subjected to or witnessing the police speak in a manner that was “rude”, “mean”, threatening, and/or generally perceived as disrespectful. This was referred to as the officers “talking hella shit” to them, being sworn at or called names during the encounter⁵. In most cases, the study participants described being spoken to in a disrespectful way during a stop recognized as being based on officers’ legitimate suspicion of their involvement in criminal behavior. Still, study participants maintained that it was important for the police to treat them with dignity and politeness (Tyler, 2003). Debi explained this dynamic – indicating that it was appropriate and understandable for the police to arrest her for dealing but disrespectful to swear at her during the process: “I was telling them like, ‘You got me [but] don’t cuss at me though [because] you think you tough because you walking around with guns and badges.’” Junior also shared a story of when he felt disrespected by rude police behavior during his face-to-face encounter. They stopped him while he was siphoning gas and though he tried to deny it, he was affronted by the officer’s disrespectful language and behavior and attempted to stop the officer from touching him. He ultimately demonstrated non-compliance by using force against the officer and escaping custody:

[The officer] said, “Why do you think I’m here?” I said, “I don’t know why you’re here.” He’s like, “Come on, man, I could smell the gas.” Just all trying to get violent and stuff....[The officer] points his finger in my face...starts hitting me in the forehead, and said, “You know damn well what I’m talking about. Don’t play dumb, you stupid—.”...So I grabbed his hand like this, I say, “Get off me. Get off me.”....He tried to put me in [handcuffs]...So then I reverse it and then...[punched] him. He just dropped instantly.

Casper also recalled a time when he and his friend were stopped and found with drugs. He described how his friend was trying to make light of the situation and the police were

⁵One male respondent explained that being on probation complicated expectations of respect. Specifically, if on probation, he perceived the police as having “the right to talk hella shit to you anyway or do whatever they want to.”

physically aggressive and verbally disrespectful by hitting his friend and swearing at them: “The cops asked him like what is that [powder] and then he was like... ‘That’s baby powder.’ ...He was like, I’m kinda ashy, I got eczema....He just started joking with the cop and [the officer] elbowed him [and said] ‘Shut the fuck up.’” Melanie shared what she characterized as a violent, disrespectful, and frightening exchange when the police surprised her while she was dealing. She called attention to the physical abuse and impolite language used during her interaction: “Some motherfuckers came from behind. I don’t know where they came from....I was shaking so hard....Them motherfuckers choked me out...calling me bitches and all that shit.” It is evident that disrespectful treatment marred the men and women’s experiences with the police, even in encounters that they otherwise recognized as legitimate because of their crime involvement at the time.

Respectful Police Behavior is Meaningful

These negative experiences and attitudes towards the police differed significantly from the descriptions surrounding the few interactions (N=6) in which the study participants believed they were treated with respect. In these cases, the minority men and women indicated that being treated with dignity was meaningful to them – as consistent with procedural justice literature (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2003; Tyler and Wakslak, 2004). For instance, Jorge recalled when the police approached him while he and some friends were hanging out and drinking:

I was just being cool as hell with the police and shit. He starts talking, he says, “Yeah, if you serious about it, I think you’d make a great cop.”...We shook hands and shit. He shook my hand and you know, he told me that I’d make a good cop and shit [and] I should consider applying when I turn 20.

He described the interaction positively and was impressed by the respect afforded by the officer. Specifically, he was touched by the officer’s suggestion that he apply to the police academy and when the officer shook his hand at the conclusion of their discussion. The respectful gesture was so impactful to Jorge commented on it twice.

Doug also discussed the impact of being treated respectfully by officers during an encounter. After he was arrested for shoplifting, the officers apprehended him and brought him to jail. Given the late hour, no one in his family could bring him a change of clothing. The police required his current clothing and they ultimately provided him with some garments to change into, a gesture that was meaningful to Doug and contributed to him forming a positive opinion of the officers: “They were putting me in regular jail and the deputies were actually nice enough. I went in there at 6 o’clock and, you know, come 9, 10 o’clock...they gave me my clothes to get dressed.”

Maurice also discussed a time when the police treated him with respect. Unlike the above-mentioned stories, he was approached on the street while not criminally involved. Maurice explained that he was a former gang member and had transformed his life to distance himself from a crime-involved lifestyle. The police, who were used to stopping him for criminal behavior, shook his hand and acknowledged his transformation. These words and actions of support were so meaningful to Maurice that they became a mechanism by which he measured his personal growth:

I had this sergeant come and shake my hand the other day like, “Whatever you’re doing, you just keep doing it...” He was like, “Man, you made the most change outta dang near everybody I’ve seen in this neighborhood.” ...Everybody used to see a totally [different me]....Police officers that used to continuously nitpick me and take me to jail for no reason, if they see me now...[they] be like, “Whatever you’re doing, keep doing it.” That’s how I know I made a change.

Thus, the gang members in this study clearly valued being treated with respect. They commented favorably when they were treated with dignity, even when stopped on suspicion of criminal behavior and when arrested. Alternatively, they expressed frustration and anger when subjected to seemingly disrespectful and inappropriate behavior and language. These responses indicated that expectations for respect and positive interpersonal treatment hold regardless the nature of the stop.

DISCUSSION

Tyler (2006) notes that dignity and respect are important facets of procedural justice because individuals value positive interpersonal treatment. Yet the gang members reported that their interactions with police were commonly characterized by disrespectful interpersonal treatment (Durán, 2008). Concerns of impolite and abusive police behavior were raised by both the men and the women in the study – suggesting that both genders shared similar perceptions of the officers’ actions. Irrespective of whether the stop was due to criminal involvement or not, the study participants desired and expected to be treated with dignity, even when they responded in an obstinate or non-cooperative way. Instead, they frequently reported being subjected to disrespectful behavior characterized by physical and verbal abuse, a finding consistent with other literature on the topic (Durán, 2008; see Mastrofski, et al., 2002; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). Also consistent with other research, this study revealed that gang members’ disrespectful experiences with police was connected to negative attitudes towards law enforcement (Durán, 2008), fear (Geller et al., 2014), non-compliance (Brunson, 2007; Gau, 2013), and distrust (Flanagan and Vaughn, 1996; Rios, 2011) – fundamental components needed to establish legitimacy (Tyler, 2006).

Mostly, the study participants described officers as being excessively aggressive by shoving, handcuffing tightly, and/or handling them roughly – reports consistent with other research on excessive use of force (Fratello et al., 2013; Keiling, 2014). In several cases, gang members described being sworn at, spoken down to with demeaning language, or called inappropriate names. When approached on suspicion of drug dealing, many participants described being choked – indicating that those involved in drug-related activities may be subjected to comparatively more aggressive police behavior. Overall, this finding demonstrates that the perception of disproportionate use of force and inappropriate language becomes central to their feelings of disrespect as it sends signals of indifference towards their status as members of the community – albeit criminally involved (Kleinig, 2014).

In general, these concerns were raised almost exclusively among the African Americans and Latinos. Only one Asian and no White respondents discussed disrespectful experiences. While these racial differences may be a result of the limited Asian and White individuals

represented in the sample, this may also suggest that African Americans and Latinos who are criminally or gang involved may be subject to comparatively worse police treatment (Mastrofski, et al., 2002; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). This finding suggests that in addition to racialized patterns of disrespectful treatment being found in the general population (Brunson and Miller, 2006), it may also extend to crime-involved minorities.

Of import, positive interactions, during which the gang member reported being treated with respect, contributed to favorable opinions about the police. Respectful behavior was commonly identified as having their hand shaken or the reporting of positive comments made about their person. In response to these interactions, the participants articulated that they *wanted* and *valued* being treated with dignity. Tyler (2006) identified that respect is meaningful among law-abiding citizens, including minority groups (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2003; Tyler and Wakslak, 2004), and this appears to extend to crime-involved individuals as well. They too seemingly value positive interpersonal treatment on the street – whether from family, social networks, or law enforcement. This suggests that police may be more effective at policing if they treat criminally involved individuals with the dignity they value, even when they are intervening on their criminal activities.

Ultimately, this research sought to investigate perceptions of respect among drug dealing gang members. We applied the procedural justice framework, with a focus on examining perceptions of respect and disrespect, to a population seldom examined in this way. In doing so, we demonstrated that the procedural justice theoretical framework could be effectively applied to criminally involved minority groups – revealing it may be generalizable to diverse groups. This investigation also indicated that there appears to be an important disconnect between policing practices and gang-member expectations of appropriate police behavior – which can have detrimental consequences for police legitimacy. While this paper explored specific police behavior that was perceived as problematic, further research should be done to examine additional behaviors that may be interpreted as disrespectful or respectful and how ubiquitous these sentiments are. Police and gang members stand to gain by having better and more respectful interactions and hopefully this research has illuminated important insights as to how that may be the case.

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