

A Multilevel Examination of the Relationship Between Racial Tension and Attitudes Toward the Police

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Abstract Prior research has established the effect of race and ethnicity on citizens' perceptions of the police. This paper serves to build on this body of literature by examining the effect of racial tension on attitudes toward the police. Specifically, we conduct multilevel analyses using survey data from Seattle, Washington to explore whether individual perceptions of racial tension and/or community-level racial tension are related to residents' attitudes toward the police. The results show that attitudes toward the police were generally less favorable among respondents who perceived racial tension or mistrust in their communities. Additionally, community racial tension had significant contextual effects on residents' perceived racial profiling by the police. This study has implications for future police policy: understanding how racial tension shapes perceptions of the police will assist in selecting and adapting crime control strategies.

Keywords Attitudes toward police · Racial tension · Race · Neighborhoods

Introduction

Currently, as police departments work toward improving their public image, public perceptions of the police is of major concern (Worrall, 1999). Public perception can affect citizens' relationship with the police on many fronts. Public attitudes regarding police legitimacy can influence residents' trust of the police, discouraging cooperation with police investigations and other practices. Additionally, negative attitudes held by citizens can cause police officers to become cynical toward the public.

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Early research on citizens' attitudes toward the police focused primarily on the individual factors that predict perceptions of the police. Strong evidence exists that young, black, low-income citizens have the least support for the police (Percy, 1980; Dunham & Alpert, 1988; Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996; Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 1999, 2000a; Reisig & Parks, 2003, but see Frank, Brandl, Cullen, & Stichman, 1996). A growing body of work has taken a multilevel approach to explaining perceptions of satisfaction and bias towards the police (Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Dai & Johnson, 2009; Wu, Sun, & Triplett, 2009; Gau, Corsaro, Stewart, & Brunson, 2012). Residents of communities with certain structural characteristics, including disadvantaged communities or those with large Black populations, report less support for police than do those living in more affluent Caucasian neighborhoods (Skogan, 2005; Tyler, 2005; Gau et al., 2012).

However, less is known about the influence of neighborhood social characteristics, including those relevant to racial issues, on community relations with the police. This study seeks to expand upon the existing knowledge regarding the influence of racially-driven social context on shaping citizens' perceptions of police. In particular, we test whether there is an association between racial tension within a community and residents' attitudes toward the police. We also explore the extent to which the differences in perceptions of the police between racial groups are contingent upon neighborhood factors such as racial tension.

In doing so, this study provides four primary contributions to the literature. First, we go beyond the demographic make-up of a community to examine how attitudes toward the police are affected by racial tension, which, to our knowledge, no prior studies have explored. Understanding the relationship between racial tension and public perceptions can benefit the police by providing information on where to apply strategies designed to reduce cynicism and improve perceptions of police legitimacy, and where to avoid implementing strategies that may decrease community cooperation with police. Second, our study helps to clarify the effect of race on attitudes toward the police by testing for variation in the effects of race across neighborhoods. Finally, this study adds to the multilevel literature on attitudes and perceptions of the police, providing additional information on the manner in which neighborhood context affects relationships between the police and the citizens they serve.

Attitudes Toward the Police

Individual-Level Correlates

Previous research shows that individual citizens' perceptions toward the police are generally positive, with citizens reporting generally high levels of satisfaction with the police (Brandl, Frank, Worden, & Bynum, 1994; Cao et al., 1996; Dunham & Alpert, 1988; Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2003; Wu et al., 2009). Still, scholars have identified a number of factors that negatively impact satisfaction with the police. These include demographic characteristics such as race, age, gender, income, and education (Brandl et al., 1994; Cao et al., 1996; Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Reisig & Parks, 2000, 2003; Schafer et al., 2003; Dai &

Johnson, 2008; Wu et al., 2009; Wehrman & Angelis, 2011). In addition, attitudes toward the police are associated with fear of crime (Cao et al., 1996; Wehrman & Angelis, 2011), previous experiences with victimization (Cao et al., 1996; Wu et al., 2009), and prior voluntary or involuntary police contact (Brandl et al., 1994; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Schafer et al., 2003; Rosenbaum, Schuck, Costello, Hawkins, & Ring, 2005; Dai & Johnson, 2008).

One of the most notable findings regarding perceptions of the police is the impact of race. Whites are generally found to have higher satisfaction and more favorable attitudes toward the police than do Blacks (Percy, 1980; Dunham & Alpert, 1988; Cao et al., 1996; Correia et al., 1996; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 1999; Reisig & Parks, 2003; Smith, 2005, but see Frank et al., 1996; Wehrman & Angelis, 2011). While a great deal of research has examined the difference between Blacks and Whites (Decker, 1981; Brown & Benedict, 2002), there has been less focus on the attitudes of other racial groups, such as Latinos or Asians. Those studies that *have* included Latinos or Asians have produced mixed results, either finding that their attitudes are not significantly different from those of Whites (e.g., Wehrman & Angelis, 2011), or that their attitudes fall between those of Whites and Blacks, where Whites' attitudes are the most favorable and Blacks hold the least favorable attitudes of the police (Waddington & Braddock, 1991; Bridenball & Jesilow, 2008; Posick, Rocque, & McDevitt, 2013; Wu, 2014). However, Latinos have indeed been found to view the police more negatively than Whites in some studies (e.g., Hadar & Snortum, 1975; Carter, 1983) or, more recently, have reported similar attitudes when compared to African-Americans (Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). The limited number of studies including Latinos and Asians – and the mixed findings of these studies – makes conclusions on the nature of their perceptions toward the police weak at best.

There are several explanations for these racial differences in attitudes toward the police. First, according to group position thesis (e.g., Blumer, 1958; Weitzer, 1999; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997), groups compete for scarce resources, including the services of the police. Therefore, the group that controls the police – generally Whites – will hold a more positive attitude toward them. Similarly, following the minority threat perspective (Blalock, 1967), the police are a tool for the majority group – in this case, Whites – to exert social control over minorities (Smith & Holmes, 2003). This leads to Whites holding more positive feelings about the police than other groups. Perceptions of the police are also likely to be unfavorable among minority groups in the United States due to a history of poor treatment of minorities by the police (President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1967). Historically, policing is argued to have its roots in slave patrols throughout the south (Walker, 1980). These patrols had the specific task of controlling the behavior of slaves, primarily catching and returning them when they fled, leading to mistrust of the police among Blacks.

Neighborhood-Level Correlates

Neighborhood context plays an important role for understanding attitudes toward the police. First, several studies have shown that concentrated disadvantage is associated with decreased satisfaction with police and diminished perceptions of procedural justice and police legitimacy (Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Weitzer, 1999, 2000a, b; Reisig & Parks, 2000, 2003; Velez, 2001; Wu et al., 2009; Gau et al., 2012). Although the effects of

concentrated disadvantage vary in magnitude, the results nevertheless support the argument that the totality of disadvantaged circumstances in the neighborhood may be most important in creating negative perceptions of police (Gau et al., 2012). Second, residential instability may reduce citizens' willingness or ability to develop a relationship with the police (e.g., Shaw & McKay, 1942; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993), leading to poor relations between the police and the community and negative public attitudes toward the police (Wu et al., 2009, but see Jesilow, Meyer, & Namazzi, 1995; Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998). Finally, violent crime rates across neighborhoods are also related to perceptions of the police (Jacob, 1971; Klinger, 1997; Wu et al., 2009). According to Wu and colleagues (2009), the relationship between crime and attitudes toward the police is the result of three factors: citizen's loss of confidence in the police to control crime, the increased potential for negative police-citizen contacts, and a decrease in residents' quality of life, which they task the police with maintaining.

Few studies have conducted multi-level analyses that include racial composition of a neighborhood as a predictor of attitudes toward the police. The few studies that have explored this relationship have focused on the differences between predominantly White and predominantly Black communities, with less attention to communities made up of other minority groups. This work indicates that controlling for neighborhood racial composition reduces the extent of the impact of individual-level race on perceptions of the police (Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Wu et al., 2009). In addition, Dunham and Alpert (1988) noticed that there could be an interaction between class and racial composition. Specifically, in their analysis of Black neighborhoods of different socioeconomic status, while dissatisfaction with the police was higher in both communities than among Whites, the middle-class neighborhood showed less dissatisfaction with the police than did the lower-class neighborhood.

Racial Tension and Attitudes Toward the Police

In addition to the racial make-up of a neighborhood, we examine the level of racial tension that exists within the community. Research on more general social cohesion – or close social ties among neighbors and trust within the community – suggests that tighter social cohesion influences cooperation between police and members of the community and reduces crime rates (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Goudriaan, Wittebrood, & Nieuwbeerta, 2006), thereby improving citizens' attitudes toward the police. For instance, extant research testing the impact of individuals' perceptions of social cohesion within their communities finds that social cohesion leads to an increase in the perception of police legitimacy and procedural justice – or the belief that actions taken by the police are fair (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Jackson & Bradford, 2009; Gau et al., 2012).

More specifically, racial tension is the degree to which community members resent or feel threatened by specific groups of people within the community based on racial status (e.g., Wilson & Taub, 2006). According to Coffey, Eldefonso, and Hartinger (1982), the root of racial tension lies in the disparity among groups to control their own future and the frustration that arises due to this disparity's existence within the social structure. Scarce research exists on the impact of racial tension on police satisfaction and perceptions of the police. Coffey and colleagues (1982) further argue that because

conflict between racial groups requires action from law enforcement, minorities come to view the police as a representation of the system that they believe is repressing them, in turn reducing their trust in the police. Goldstein (1993) recognizes neighborhood tension as an impediment to strong community-police relations. He notes that it is imperative to reduce these tensions in order to foster mutual trust, promote sharing of information, and familiarize officers with the culture of the neighborhoods they police.

The current study attempts to extend our understanding of perceptions of the police by focusing on neighborhood correlates of specific perceptions of the police. Specifically, we focus on neighborhood racial tension. It is expected that residents of communities with high levels of racial tension will hold negative attitudes toward the police. Tension between different racial groups within a community is believed to hinder social organization and cohesion (e.g., Shaw & McKay, 1942; Merry, 1981). Poor social cohesion within neighborhoods, in turn, fosters unfavorable perceptions of the police, such as mistrust (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Goldstein, 1993; Sampson et al., 1997; Gau et al., 2012). In addition to decreasing social cohesion and thereby reducing cooperation between the police and the community, racial tension may lead minority groups to view the police as tools of oppression (Coffey et al., 1982).

In addition, we examine whether the effects of individual race vary by neighborhood racial context. Because previous research suggests that attitudes held by Blacks may be influenced by context (see, for example, Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999), it is expected that the relationship between race and attitudes toward the police will be conditioned by neighborhood racial context. However, clear hypotheses do not emerge from the existing literature. On the one hand, because of the potential negative influence of racial context on perceptions of the police, differences between the perceptions of Whites and other racial groups may be more pronounced in minority communities or racially tense communities. On the other hand, following extensions of group position theory that posit positive attitudes of the police among minority groups when they have more political power (e.g., Frank et al., 1996; Wehrman & Angelis, 2011), minorities' perceptions of the police may be more favorable in communities with large minority populations due to their status in such areas as the dominant racial group.

Research Methods

Data and Sample

These hypotheses are tested with secondary data analysis using the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey, a telephone survey conducted between 2002 and 2003¹ (for technical information on the research, see Matsueda, 2010). The inclusion of survey questions about racial tension makes the data uniquely suitable for an examination of the influence of racial tension on outcomes related to crime and the criminal justice system. Also, given the racial make-up of the population of Seattle, these data allow us to analyze perceptions of the police across multiple ethnic groups.

¹ It must be noted that the age of the data is a potential limitation. However, prior research does support the notion that global perceptions of the police are static over time and only slightly influenced by specific incidents (see Brandl et al., 1994).

Households were sampled from all 123 census tracts in Seattle, Washington. There are between 21 and 110 households included from each census tract, with an average of 47. The data used herein includes two subsamples: a random sample of households within all census tracts and an oversampling of households within neighborhoods with high proportions of ethnic and racial minority residents.

The sample is made up of 3,759 adult individuals from different households. The average age of the sample is 48.55. Half (50.0 %) are female. The sample is 81 % non-Hispanic White, 4 % African-American, 7 % Asian or Pacific Islander, 5 % Hispanic or Latino, and 3 % other.² These are consistent with the general population of Seattle according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion; the sample remaining after listwise deletion was not substantially different from the full sample in terms of demographics, attitudes toward the police, or perceptions of racial tension.

Dependent Variables

Three separate dependent variables measuring distinct perceptions of the police are used in this study (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics for all variables in the analysis).³ First, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that “The police are doing a good job in dealing with problems that really concern people in this neighborhood.” Second, respondents were asked how much they agree that “In this neighborhood, police just hassle residents, rather than being helpful.” Third, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “Racial profiling is a problem in this neighborhood.”

The responses for each of these three measures ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The variables were recoded as dummy variables, with 1 representing agreement with the statement and 0 representing disagreement with the statement. Therefore, a score of 1 on the first variable indicates a positive perception of the police; conversely, for the second and third variables, a score of 1 indicates a negative perception of the police.

Key Independent Variables

First, at the individual level, we include two measures of perceived racial tension,⁴ as individuals’ perceptions of the community are likely to affect attitudes toward the police. Respondents were asked how much, on a scale from 1 to 4, they agreed with the following statements: “There is racial tension in my neighborhood” and “Different

² The survey did not ask about Latino ethnicity and race separately. Respondents were allowed to choose multiple categories to represent their race; respondents who identified as both Latino and another race were coded as Latino. Respondents who selected “other” or who identified as mixed race were excluded from the present analysis.

³ The three items are not combined because reliability analysis indicated that they did not hang together well (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.646$), suggesting that they do not measure the same underlying concept. We considered including a fourth dependent variable: the survey contained questions about respondents’ belief that the police are biased against different groups. However, we excluded this because the variation across neighborhoods, while statistically significant, accounted for less than 10 % of the total variation (compare to percentages given in footnote 6).

⁴ Reliability analysis suggested that these items do not hang together at the individual level (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.530$); therefore, two single-item measures were included at the individual level.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Variables	Scale	Mean	S.D.	Range	N
Dependent variables					
Perceived police effectiveness	(0 = police are not doing a good job, 1 = police are doing a good job)	0.30	0.46	0–1	3743
Perceived police hassling	(0 = police help residents, 1 = police hassle residents)	0.05	0.22	0–1	3678
perceived racial profiling	(0 = racial profiling is not a problem, 1 = racial profiling is a problem)	0.20	0.40	0–1	3439
Individual-level predictors					
Perceived racial mistrust	(1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree)	1.90	0.65	1–4	3437
Perceived racial tension	(1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree)	1.70	0.69	1–4	3669
Police presence	(1 = Less than once a month to 4 = Every day)	2.37	1.10	1–4	3719
Black	(0 = Other, 1 = Black)	0.04	0.19	0–1	3571
Asian	(0 = Other, 1 = Asian)	0.07	0.26	0–1	3569
Latino	(0 = Other, 1 = Latino)	0.05	0.21	0–1	3563
Foreign born	(0 = Native born, 1 = Foreign born)	0.12	0.33	0–1	3756
Property victimization	(Sum of property victimization)	4.32	5.66	0–106	3698
Violent victimization	(Sum of assault victimization)	1.42	6.09	0–102	3710
Risk perception	(0 = safe or very safe, 1 = unsafe or very unsafe)	0.16	0.37	0–1	3749
Perceived disorder	(sum of disorder measures)				
Home ownership	(0 = Non-homeowner, 1 = Owns home)	0.68	0.47	0–1	3753
Female	(0 = Male, 1 = Female)	0.50	0.50	0–1	3759
Age	(Respondent's Age in Years)	48.55	16.15	18–103	3722
Education	(1 = 8th Grade or less to 7 = Graduate School)	5.74	1.33	1–7	3751
Income	(1 = Under \$5,000 to 15 = \$200,000+)	9.99	2.92	1–15	3232
Employed	(0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.69	0.46	0–1	3754
Neighborhood-level predictors					
Proportion black	(proportion Black respondents)	0.04	0.06	0.00–0.35	123
Proportion Asian	(proportion Asian respondents)	0.08	0.10	0.00–0.62	123
Proportion Latino	(proportion Latino respondents)	0.05	0.05	0.00–0.36	123
Racial tension	(Sum of aggregated racial tension measures)	3.59	0.43	2.93–5.00	123
Average income	(Average of individual household income)	9.94	1.21	4.85–12.28	123
Residential stability	(Average number of years at address)	11.67	4.26	3.79–24.88	123
Violent victimization rate	(Proportion respondents with violent victimization)	0.06	0.06	0.00–0.32	123
Property victimization rate	(Proportion respondents with property victimization)	0.57	0.12	0.18–0.79	123

racers trust each other in my neighborhood.” These measures were recoded so that higher scores indicated perceptions of tension and mistrust between racial groups.

Second, we include a measure of racial tension at the census tract level to estimate contextual effects of community racial tension. Responses to the two questions above were averaged within census tracts; then, because reliability analysis indicates that they hang together at the neighborhood level (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.834$) they were summed to create an overall measure of neighborhood racial tension.

Control Variables

We include several neighborhood-level control variables, which are created by aggregating the individual survey data.⁵ Average income is measured as the mean of the individual-level variable, which used a 15-point ordinal scale, with one representing “less than \$5,000” and 15 representing “more than \$200,000.” Residential stability is measured as the average of the number of years that respondents had lived in their current homes. The third and fourth variables are included to proxy neighborhood crime. Respondents were asked whether they had experienced a number of types of criminal victimization in their home neighborhoods. These were combined into measures indicating whether or not respondents had experienced violent (assault and robbery) and property crime victimization (breaking and entering, theft, auto theft, and vandalism) during adulthood in their current residential communities. These individual-level responses were then aggregated across census tracts, providing a measure of the proportion of respondents within each tract that had experienced property and violent crime in that community. Finally, racial composition is measured using three variables indicating the proportion of respondents within each census tract that identified as Black, Asian, and Latino.

Several individual-level characteristics with theoretical relevance to attitudes toward the police are also included as controls. First, perception of police presence is measured using the responses to the question, “about how many times in an average month do you see a police car drive by your house/apartment.” Answers were on a four-point scale ranging from “less than once a month” to “every day.” Second, counts of victimization incidents that occurred during adulthood were divided into violent victimization (assault and robbery) and property victimization (breaking and entering, theft, auto theft, and vandalism). Third, an additive scale representing perceptions of neighborhood disorder was created using responses to questions asking respondents the extent to which they believed the following five items were a problem in their neighborhoods: groups of teenagers hanging around in the street; litter, garbage, or trash in the streets; spray-painted graffiti on buildings or streets; abandoned houses and rundown buildings; and neighbors who cause trouble and make noise (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.743$). The possible responses ranged from 1 (“not a problem”) to 3 (“a big problem”). Fourth is a measure of risk perception. Respondents were asked, “How safe do you think your neighborhood is from crime and criminals?” Possible answers ranged from 1 (very safe) to 4 (very unsafe).

⁵ In the dataset, participants are grouped using randomly-generated census tract identification numbers. Therefore, we are unable to link the survey responses to Census data.

In addition, we control for a number of individual-level sociodemographic characteristics. Four are dummy variables indicating whether the respondent was born outside of the United States, female, employed, or a homeowner. Also included were age in years; education, which was measured as an ordinal scale with categories ranging from 1 (less than high school) to 7 (graduate or professional school); and income, which was measured as an ordinal scale with categories ranging from 1 (less than \$5,000) to 15 (greater than \$200,000). Finally, three dummy variables – Black, Latino, and Asian – are included in the model to represent race, with Whites used as the reference group.

Analytic Strategy

To test the hypotheses presented above, binary logistic regression models are estimated in HLM 7.0. Because individuals within groups may be more similar to each other than to individuals in other groups, resulting in biased estimates when using traditional regression methods (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), multilevel modeling is used, which also allows for an examination of the effect of neighborhood characteristics on individual outcomes. Checks for multicollinearity were conducted and no problems were found; the lowest value of tolerance was .417 and the highest value of VIF was 2.396.⁶

Results

First, we examined the effects of individual- and neighborhood-level characteristics on the belief that police are doing a good job solving problems in the neighborhood, the belief that the police hassle residents of the neighborhood rather than being helpful, and the belief that racial profiling is a problem in the neighborhood.⁷ The results of the multilevel analyses are presented in Table 2.⁸

At the individual level, perceived racial tension or mistrust was related to all three perceptions of the police. Individuals who perceived less trust between the racial groups in their communities were less likely to believe the police were doing a good job solving problems in their communities. In addition, individuals who believed their neighborhoods suffered from racial tension were more likely to believe that the police hassle residents of the community and engage in racial profiling. The results presented

⁶ Neighborhood-level measures of incivilities and police presence were considered, but were not included due to high correlations with racial tension ($r=-.663$ and $.679$, respectively) and income ($r=-.604$ and $.707$, respectively). However, supplemental analyses showed that including these characteristics in the model did not substantially change the results.

⁷ Before beginning the main analyses, it is first necessary to determine whether these beliefs vary across census tracts. To do this, an unconditional, random ANOVA model (i.e., a model with no predictors added) was estimated for each dependent variable (not presented here). The results indicated that significant variation exists across census tracts for satisfaction with the police (variance component=.414, $p<.001$), the belief that police hassle residents (variance component=.679, $p<.001$), and the belief that the police engage in racial profiling (variance component=.887, $p<.001$); therefore, it is appropriate to proceed with the multilevel analyses. The intra-class correlation coefficients show that the variation across neighborhoods accounts for 31.4 % of the total variation in police satisfaction, 47.7 % of the total variation in the belief that police hassle residents of their community, and 49.7 % of the total variation in the belief that the police engage in racial profiling.

⁸ In these models, the independent variables were grand mean centered in order to avoid confounding contextual effects with compositional effects (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

Table 2 Hierarchical logistic regression models for attitudes toward the police

	Perceived police effectiveness		Perceived police hassling		Perceived racial profiling	
	Odds ratio (SE)		Odds ratio (SE)		Odds ratio (SE)	
Level 1						
Intercept	11.392 (1.021)*		0.627 (1.502)		0.001 (1.482)**	
Perceived racial mistrust	0.761 (0.103)**		0.933 (0.142)		0.932 (0.082)	
Perceived racial tension	1.074 (0.097)		1.998 (0.150)***		1.510 (0.082)***	
Police presence	1.252 (0.075)**		1.187 (0.104)		1.277 (0.055)***	
Black	0.490 (0.277)*		2.389 (0.327)**		3.816 (0.231)***	
Asian	1.139 (0.289)		2.370 (0.340)*		0.836 (0.211)	
Latino	1.790 (0.333)†		1.333 (0.391)		1.444 (0.222)†	
Foreign born	1.344 (0.250)		0.986 (0.276)		1.106 (0.163)	
Property victimization	0.975 (0.012)*		1.016 (0.010)		1.018 (0.011)	
Violent victimization	0.985 (0.008)*		1.014 (0.008)†		1.025 (0.007)**	
Risk perception	0.456 (0.097)***		1.125 (0.135)		0.257 (0.074)***	
Perceived disorder	0.838 (0.040)***		1.090 (0.049)†		1.009 (0.030)	
Home ownership	0.976 (0.146)		0.834 (0.256)		1.068 (0.149)	
Female	1.345 (0.134)*		0.933 (0.198)		1.287 (0.118)*	
Age	1.024 (0.005)***		0.995 (0.008)		0.981 (0.004)***	
Education	0.990 (0.049)		0.840 (0.083)*		1.038 (0.043)	
Income	0.981 (0.028)		0.946 (0.039)		0.949 (0.024)*	
Employed	1.016 (0.161)		1.174 (0.248)		1.338 (0.147)*	
Level 2						
Racial tension	0.731 (0.221)		0.834 (0.268)		3.198 (0.237)***	

Table 2 (continued)

	Perceived police effectiveness		Perceived police hassling		Perceived racial profiling	
	Odds ratio (SE)		Odds ratio (SE)		Odds ratio (SE)	
Proportion Black	0.070 (1.473) [†]		69.216 (1.454)**		13.154 (1.183)*	
Proportion Asian	1.817 (0.614)		0.171 (1.177)		0.583 (0.695)	
Proportion latino	0.645 (1.522)		0.318 (1.307)		0.942 (1.142)	
Average income	1.114 (0.061) [†]		0.773 (0.095)**		1.167 (0.082) [†]	
Residential stability	0.988 (0.018)		1.020 (0.029)		1.011 (0.020)	
Violent victimization rate	1.025 (0.180)		0.819 (0.326)		0.938 (0.199)	
Property victimization rate	1.267 (.130) [†]		0.926 (.174)		0.919 (.132)	
Random effects	Variance Component (SD)	χ^2	Variance Component (SD)	χ^2	Variance Component (SD)	χ^2
Intercept	0.078	125.875	0.001	121.908	0.192	174.339
Level-1 error	0.929		0.100		0.919	
Neighborhood variation explained	0.812		0.999		0.784	
N (level-1)	2676		2702		2548	

Neighborhoods ($N=123$)*** $p<.001$; ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$; [†] $p<.10$

in Table 2 also show that, at the neighborhood level, residents of census tracts with higher racial tension were more likely to believe that the police engage in racial profiling, regardless of their individual perceptions of race relations within the community. However, neighborhood-level tension was not related to the perceptions that police are doing a good job or that police hassle residents of the neighborhood.

Two other neighborhood characteristics were associated with perceptions of the police. First, residents living in census tracts with more Blacks were more likely to believe that the police hassle community members and that the police engage in racial profiling. Second, average income was negatively associated with the belief that police hassle residents; this belief was lower in communities with higher average incomes.

A number of individual-level control variables were associated with perceptions of the police. Those who reported more frequently seeing police cars in their neighborhoods were more likely to feel that the police were doing a good job. Police presence was also positively related to the belief that the police use racial profiling. Violent and property victimization were negatively related to the belief that the police were doing a good job solving problems. Violent victimization was also significantly and positively related to the perception that the police use racial profiling. Individuals who perceived their neighborhoods as unsafe were less likely to believe that the police are doing a good job and were more likely to believe that the police use racial profiling. Those who perceived a problem with physical and social incivilities in their communities were less likely to believe that police are doing a good job.

Several sociodemographic variables were also related to perceptions of the police. First, education was negatively related to the perception that the police engage in hassling behavior rather than helping the community. Second, individuals with higher incomes were less likely to believe that the police engage in racial profiling. Third, employed individuals were more likely to believe racial profiling occurs. Fourth, females were more likely to report that the police were doing a good job in their neighborhoods, but were also more likely to agree that the police use racial profiling. Fifth, older individuals were more likely to report that the police were doing a good job in their neighborhoods, and were less likely to believe that racial profiling by the police occurs. Finally, individual-level race was important in forming perceptions of the police. Blacks had less favorable perceptions of the police than did Whites: they were less likely to feel that the police were doing a good job solving problems within the community, while they were more likely to believe that police hassle members of their communities and engage in racial profiling. In addition, Asians were more likely than Whites to think that the police hassle members of their communities.

Do the Effects of Race on Perceptions of the Police Vary by Neighborhood Context?

Next, we examined whether the effects of individual race on attitudes toward the police vary by neighborhood racial context. Before examining cross-level interactions, it is necessary to estimate a random coefficients model in which the effects of the variable of interest are allowed to vary while all other effects were fixed (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). This test is conducted to determine whether the effects of the variables of interest vary across census tracts; if significant variation in the slope exists, then this variation can then be modeled using cross-level interactions. The random coefficients

Table 3 Random coefficient regression models for logistic regression coefficients

	Perceived police effectiveness			Perceived police hassling			Perceived racial profiling		
	Variance component (SD)	χ^2	p-value	Variance component (SD)	χ^2	p-value	Variance component (SD)	χ^2	p-value
Black	0.404 (0.636)	60.865	> .05	0.570 (0.755)	38.982	> .05	0.610 (0.781)	22.657	> .05
Asian	0.972 (0.986)	71.696	> .05	0.431 (0.656)	52.463	> .05	0.071 (0.267)	26.141	> .05
Latino	0.322 (0.568)	64.829	> .05	3.333 (1.826)	64.047	> .05	0.822 (0.907)	27.342	> .05

models (see Table 3) indicated that the racial differences in perceptions of the police did not vary significantly across census tracts. This suggests that, in this sample, the differences between perceptions held by Whites and those held by members of other racial groups did not change across neighborhoods.

Discussion

In this study, we hypothesized that racial tension would be related to negative attitudes toward the police. As expected, individuals' perceptions of race relations in their communities were related to all the dependent variables, with attitudes toward the police less favorable among those who believed their communities were racially tense or suffered from racial mistrust. However, our hypothesis regarding the contextual effect of neighborhood racial tension was only partially supported. The results showed a contextual effect of community racial tension on the belief that the police engage in racial profiling, above and beyond the effects of individual perceptions of racial tension in the community. This shows that, apart from individuals' assessments of their neighborhood's racial tension, living in a community that is racially tense influences one's perceptions regarding police use of racial profiling.

The findings of this study have important theoretical and practical implications. First, the results regarding the association between neighborhood racial tension and perceived racial profiling, if replicated in future studies, may have important ramifications for police practice. Because there is a link between perceived procedural and distributive justice by the police and perceptions of legitimacy (Tyler & Wakslak, 2004; Engel, 2005; Tyler, 2005, 2006; Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Gau & Brunson, 2010), it is imperative for police to recognize that racial tension within a community can put citizens on edge and make them more likely to judge police behavior as detrimental and ultimately less legitimate. If racially tense communities already believe that racial profiling is a problem, then police should avoid policies or strategies that are often considered discriminatory, such as zero tolerance policing, as these practices may further deteriorate the relationship between the police and the community.

In addition, Goldstein (1993) recognizes neighborhood tension as an impediment to strong community-police relations, noting that police must reduce tension in order to foster mutual trust, promote sharing of information, and familiarize the police with the culture of the neighborhoods in which they police. Similarly, Reisig and Parks (2004)

argue that building strong police-community collaborations reduces the effects of concentrated disadvantage on crime and disorder, and allows residents to foster better feelings of safety. Our findings suggest that racial tension may cause friction between officers and citizens, reducing trust and the willingness to work together. As Reisig and Giacomazzi (1998) note, more stable environments have better perceptions of the police. Therefore, steps should be taken to address racial tension, as this could improve perceptions of the police and facilitate the bonds that police build through strategies such as community and problem-oriented policing.

Second, consistent with previous research (e.g., Dunham & Alpert, 1988; Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Stewart, Baumer, Brunson, & Simons, 2009; Wu et al., 2009), the size of the Black population was significantly related to perceptions of the police regarding police hassling and racial profiling examined in this study. In particular, based on the results of this study, it seems that residents of communities with large Black populations may feel at odds with the police (i.e., believe that the police hassle residents of the community and that the police engage in racial profiling against members of the community). Recent literature has provided specific recommendations to improve perceptions toward the police in minority communities, and our findings suggest that it may be important for police to heed these recommendations, especially in communities suffering from racial tension. Approaches such as adding citizen review boards and making the complaint process known to citizens are gaining support among citizens from these areas (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006; Weitzer & Brunson, 2009; Brunson & Weitzer, 2011). Another approach is to assign Black officers to high-percentage-Black neighborhoods, which has seen modest improvements on attitudes toward the police (Weitzer, 2000b). According to Weitzer (2000b), Black officers may better recognize critical issues affecting Black communities, thereby presenting residents with an option they may feel more comfortable with in hopes of improving communication or resolving tense situations.

Third, in our study, individual race was one of the most important correlates of attitudes toward the police. In particular, consistent with previous research (Percy, 1980; Dunham & Alpert, 1988; Cao et al., 1996; Correia et al., 1996; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 1999; Reisig & Parks, 2003; Smith, 2005), we found that Blacks held overwhelmingly less favorable views of the police than other respondents. While previous research suggests that race may not be as important as neighborhood characteristics (e.g., Dunham & Alpert, 1988; Jesilow et al., 1995; Reisig, McCluskey, Mastroski, & Terrill, 2004; Sampson & Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Weitzer, 1999), we found that Blacks were more critical of the police than were Whites even when controlling for characteristics of the neighborhoods in which they lived. A potential explanation for this inconsistency with previous research is that earlier studies have used samples from cities – such as Chicago, Indianapolis, Miami, and Washington, DC – that suffer from greater racial segregation than Seattle does (see, for example, Silver, 2015). Therefore, in this sample, the effect of race may not be as likely to be conflated with neighborhood characteristics as in previous research, allowing for a better examination of the separate effects of individual race and neighborhood context.

It was also expected that perceptions of the police held by minority groups would be even less favorable in communities with larger minority populations and/or higher levels of racial tension. Instead, we found that the racial differences in attitudes toward the police were consistent across neighborhoods; while neighborhood context matters

for citizens of all races, the *difference between the attitudes of Whites and other groups* was similar across census tracts. This suggests that race-specific influences on perceptions of the police may be pervasive, affecting minorities – especially Blacks – similarly regardless of community context. While Blacks in disadvantaged neighborhoods may hold less favorable perceptions of the police than Blacks in more affluent communities, our findings suggest that Blacks’ attitudes regarding the police may be more negative than Whites’ regardless of the type of community in which they reside.

We also examined perceptions of the police among multiple minority groups rather than focusing solely on the attitudes of Blacks. Our results do not provide much support for the idea that Asians’ and Latinos’ beliefs about the police are distinct from those of Whites. On average, Asians were more likely to hold the belief that the police hassle members of the community. Conversely, while Latinos were (non-significantly) more likely than Whites to perceive racial profiling by the police, they held somewhat more positive perceptions of the police’s ability to solve problems in their communities. Therefore, while Blacks’ perceptions of the police were consistently lower than those of Whites, variation exists in the extent to which perceptions held by Latinos and Asians differed from those of Whites. This offers insight into a dynamic that can guide future research and potentially clarify the mixed results of past research. The results indicate that it might be the case that, for certain attitudes toward the police, Latinos and Asians share similar perceptions held by Whites but align more closely with Blacks in terms of other attitudes. This inconsistency in perceptions of the police may reflect a rational interpretation of the Asian and Latino communities’ relationships with the police; in particular, the extent to which police behave differently toward members of different ethnicities may vary by type of decision, and this may influence perceptions regarding police decision-making.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The availability of measures regarding racial tension in the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey make the data well-suited for studying the relationship between racial tension and attitudes toward the police. Nevertheless, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. First, this research is limited due to the lack of available measures indicating contact with the police, which can influence perceptions of the police (e.g., Frank, Smith, & Novak, 2005; Skogan, 2005; Tyler, 2005). Second, because we use cross-sectional data, it is difficult to establish temporal order – it is possible that police-community relations may influence racial tension within the community. Therefore, additional research using longitudinal data is needed. Third, while census tracts are commonly used to represent neighborhoods, neighborhood boundaries are loosely defined and often subjective. Thus, scholars conducting future research on this topic should consider exploring other measurements – such as egohoods or activity spaces (see Hipp & Boessen, 2013; Wikström, Ceccato, Hardie, & Treiber, 2010). Fourth, several of our measures required respondents to interpret somewhat vague terms that may be interpreted differently by different individuals (e.g., “racial profiling,” “hassle residents”). Future research may benefit from using different methods that provide more specific information, such as having participants respond to scenarios involving the police.

Finally, due to its ethnic diversity, Seattle allows for an examination of various racial groups, and the survey data we used provides a unique opportunity to examine perceptions of racial tension. However, perceptions of the police were generally favorable and perceptions of racial tension were low. Therefore, this study should be replicated in different areas – especially cities located in the South or others that historically have suffered from poor race relations – to determine whether the effects of racial tension found herein are generalizable to other locations.

Conclusion

Given recent events regarding police misconduct and racial bias, it is important for policing scholars to begin exploring factors such as racial tension that may be related to police-community relations. Despite the limitations discussed above, our findings identify previously-unstudied influences on perceptions of the police – namely, we found that residents who perceive racial tension or mistrust in their communities view the police more negatively, and that residents of neighborhoods with high levels of racial tension are more likely to believe that the police engage in racial profiling. Future research should further address the impact of police strategies such as community policing or order maintenance and zero tolerance policing on public perception directly (e.g., Gau & Brunson, 2010) by examining whether and how racial tension affects the effectiveness of such policies or the community's acceptance of police strategies. Because public perception will play an increasing role in future policing due to an increase in the visibility of police actions, police will only benefit from a better understanding of the link between community characteristics, public perception, and effectiveness.

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