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Theorizing Racial Discord over Policing Before and After Ferguson

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Drawing on two theses from the race relations literature, this article presents a foundational perspective on core relationships between the police and racial groups in the United States. The theses—group position and minority threat—are described and expanded upon, applied to long-standing group relations with the police, and further illustrated with material on the racial politics surrounding recent incidents of police misconduct. Findings from surveys and other research methods are presented in support of the theoretical framework.

Keywords group position; minority threat; racialized policing; racial politics

Almost 50 years ago, a seminal study concluded that blacks and whites "live in completely different worlds" in relation to the police in the United States (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 141). This verdict highlighted the deep divide between blacks and whites at the time—a racial fault line that was not mediated, in the study, by age, gender, or social class. Subsequent research shows that these demographic variables, along with neighborhood context and media representations, shape individuals' perceptions and experiences of the police, yet the race-based "different worlds" frame is arguably still salient today. In the three years since Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (August 2014), the race gap in opinions of the police has widened and

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the larger socio-political climate around policing has become increasingly polarized and impassioned.[1] Several police killings since 2014, well-publicized and clustered in a relatively short time span, have shaken public confidence and sparked intense debate about police practices. The level of outrage after these events surpasses that which followed high-profile beatings and killings a decade or two ago (Lawrence, 2000).

This article argues that two related theses from the race relations literature —group position and minority threat—are uniquely valuable in explaining racial differences in group relations with the police. The two theses are (1) described and expanded upon, (2) linked to empirical findings at the macro and micro levels, and (3) further illustrated with material on recent controversial incidents involving the police. The theoretical framework advanced in the article is not intended to supplant other valuable approaches.[2] Instead, I argue that it provides an *indispensable foundation* for a full understanding of race and policing in the United States and arguably other multiracial societies as well.[3]

The Group-Position Thesis

Individuals' attitudes toward the police are partly based on their personal contacts with officers, and specifically whether they feel they were treated respectfully and fairly and provided with explanations for police actions. Such *procedural justice* during encounters influences not only how people assess the immediate situation but also how they view the police more generally (Jackson et al., 2013; Tyler & Huo, 2002). When a person is given no reason for being stopped, detained in public for a long time, subjected to arbitrary actions, verbally demeaned, or physically abused, it is almost guaranteed that he or she will define such actions as unjust; for many, the experience will also color their overall opinion of the police (Tyler & Huo, 2002).

While substantial research has been devoted to procedural justice at the micro level, a parallel literature shows that other important factors also shape citizens' opinions: the historical legacy of policing, ecological factors, outcomes of encounters (distributive justice), media reporting on events, and information conveyed within social networks (e.g. Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969;

1. Gallup (2017) compared averages for polls taken in 2012—2014 and 2015—2017, and reports that the percentage of respondents who have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police increased slightly for whites (58—61%) and decreased for blacks (35—30%) and Hispanics (59—45%).
2. Examples include theoretical work on police subculture, implicit bias, procedural justice, social dominance, neighborhood social disorganization, etc.
3. The two theses are clearly evidenced in profoundly unequal and ethnically polarized societies, such as apartheid-era South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe and contemporary Israel, Iraq, and Northern Ireland (Brewer, 1994; Brogden & Shearing, 1993; Hasisi, 2008; Weitzer, 1990, 1995). On Britain and France, see Jackson, Bradford, Stanko, and Hohl (2013) and Fassin (2013).

Brunson & Weitzer, 2011; Kane, 2002; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010; Smith, 1986; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Moving from the individual level to the group level, these diverse influences can be combined to explain why African Americans and Hispanics have significantly more negative relations with the police than whites.[4] But this *additive* approach, integrating a variety of factors, tells only part of the story. A broader model is needed as well, one that highlights key *relations* between racial groups and between those groups and the police.

The *group-position thesis* offers one such relational approach. Herbert Blumer's classic thesis presents racial attitudes not simply as individual-level beliefs and opinions but also as a reflection of intergroup competition and conflict. In this model, "racial feelings point to and depend on a positional arrangement of racial groups" (Blumer, 1958, p. 4). Prejudice and racial stereotypes are outgrowths of a collective "sense of group position," and *group interests* condition both own-group affinity and intergroup relations. Group interests are imposed by the relative position of each group in the extant racial-stratification order—interests that consist of proprietary claims to resources, opportunities, status, and power. Several major studies lend empirical support to this perspective (e.g. Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Quillian, 1995).

A central feature of the group-position model is that of *vicarious experience* and *linked fate*. When members of a subordinate group see a group member subjected to harm, it is common for other members to empathize and experience the harm vicariously, as if it happened to them.[5] Moreover, a vicarious experience can have broad multiplier effects within social networks when individuals discuss an incident with family members, friends, or neighbors. In addition to the indirect experiential dimension, a certain kind of *learning* takes place (learning about group fate; learning about the Other) through this process of "differential identification" with a person of the same racial background (Glaser, 1956). The dynamic is especially salient when the person responsible for the harm is both a member of the dominant racial group and an authority figure—e.g. a white police officer in America.

In a national survey, blacks were between *three to eleven times* more likely than whites to report that someone in their household, other than the

4. The proportion of Hispanics who hold any given attitude toward the police consistently places them intermediate (often equidistant) between blacks and whites, as shown in this article and other sources (Weitzer, 2014). Relations between the police and Asian Americans are underresearched and most surveys lack sufficient numbers of Asians to compare them to other racial groups. But, overall, they tend to align with whites in their attitudes toward and experiences with the police.

5. Linked racial fate across classes is the prevailing pattern, but its degree varies by context. For example, racial profiling stops cross-cut social classes, whereas street crime is concentrated in poor communities and middle-class individuals tend to draw a sharp distinction between these offenders and themselves (Forman, 2017, p. 243).

respondent, had been stopped by the police solely because of their race; treated unfairly by the police in their neighborhood or city; and verbally or physically abused by an officer in the respondent's city (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). The proportion of Hispanics reporting each of the above was closer to blacks than to whites. A decade later, a national poll of young adults 18–30 years old found that 44% of blacks, 22% of Hispanics, and 19% of whites reported that "someone I know" had experienced either harassment or violence from the police (BYP, 2016).

Vicarious experience points to the importance of social networks in shaping individuals' relations with the police. As an example of what I am calling a foundational perspective on race and policing, racially disparate orientations toward the police are so ingrained that, for minority group members, cautionary tales are actively transmitted inter-generationally. African American elders typically have conversations with youth in which they instruct them on proper conduct norms in encounters with the police—such as keeping hands in plain view, speaking respectfully, avoiding sudden movements, and complying with officer commands (Brunson & Weitzer, 2011). There is no evidence that white parents routinely engage in a similar conversation with their children; if there is any conversation at all, it is likely that the police are presented as allies available to help resolve problems. This is just one example of the bedrock "different worlds" model mentioned earlier.

The inverse of vicarious experience is *projected experience*: an individual views his or her treatment by a police officer as exemplifying what other members of the racial group are believed to experience. Just as personal experience can be amplified by others' experiences, a personal experience can be projected outward—symbolically merging one's experience with either remote incidents or larger group-level patterns (Mutz, 1994). The latter dynamic is illustrated in the finding that blacks who personally experience frequent instances of discrimination by police officers are more likely to believe that police discrimination against their residential *neighborhood* is serious—a pattern not found for whites (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010). In another study documenting differential identification, drivers who had been stopped by the police were asked questions about the nature of the stop and about their identitification with same-race people: i.e. how important race was to them and how much loyalty they felt toward members of their racial group. Blacks who had experienced an investigatory police stop (i.e. one not based solely on a traffic offense) were significantly more likely to identify with other African Americans; for whites, however, such stops were negatively related to their identification with other whites (Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Markel, 2014). The authors suggest that a stop increases blacks' sense of group indentification because the stop is seen as an example of what other blacks experience routinely, whereas the opposite finding for whites may be due to a momentary interruption in their sense of white privilege when subjected to formal social control in a police stop.

Expanding the Group-Position Model

Blumer focused on intergroup relations, but, as implied above, his theory is also applicable to *group relations with social institutions* (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Racial and ethnic minorities may differ considerably in their historical treatment by major institutions and in the lingering effects of this legacy:

> Among racial minority groups, the level of alienation [from social institutions] would vary based on differences in the persistence, pervasiveness across domains of life, and extremity of inequality of life chances. This argument implies that members of more recent and voluntarily incorporated minority groups will feel less alienation than members of long-term and involuntarily incorporated minority groups. (Bobo, 1999, p. 461)

Historical patterns help explain why African Americans, who were initially coercively incorporated, have had more strained relations with state institutions than groups that voluntarily migrated to the United States. In this racial hierarchy, Latinos faced less discrimination than African Americans but significantly more than whites (Bobo, 1999; Escobar, 1999; on Britain, see Jackson et al., 2013).

If the dominant group believes that it is entitled to advantages and resources, it follows that it should have an affinity with the institutions that serve its interests.[6] Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, and Levin (2004) distinguish between "hierachy-enhancing" and "hierarchy-attenuating" institutions, with the criminal justice system exemplifying the former insofar as it operates in ways that reproduce social inequality.[7] In the aggregate, coercive crime-control practices help to maintain existing hierarchies, thus benefiting the dominant group. At the same time, the fact that subordinate groups occupy a disadvantaged position in the social structure creates an *irreducible level of strain* toward frontline agents of the criminal justice system: the police. That some amount of strain is inevitable in the existing racial order is vividly described by Bayley and Mendelsohn:

> The police are the ubiquitous, public, authority-laden symbols of [minorities'] second-class citizenship. Upon them is vented the accumulated frustrations of lifetimes of inequality and subservience. … The position the police occupy in the minority world is only partly a result of what the police do in that world; more importantly, their position is a function of fundamental emotional

6. A group's "affinity" with state institutions can be measured in different ways. One is a survey question probing the extent to which the police can be "trusted to do the right thing for you and your community": 72% of whites responded "always" or "often" to this question, compared to 33% of blacks and 45% of Hispanics (AP/NORC, 2015). Respondents may interpret "your community" racially or geographically.

7. Comparing the anti-egalitarian social-dominance scores of a sample of police officers, public defenders, jurors, and university students, researchers found that police were the most and public defenders the least social-dominance oriented (Sidanius et al., 2004).

> judgements made by people subjected to pervasive deprivation and inequality. (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 141)

The link between racial inequality and policing is reflected in a recent survey asking respondents whether they thought that "problems with race relations in our society cause police to treat minorities unjustly": blacks overwhelmingnly agreed with the statement, compared to less than a third of whites (see Table 1).

Consistent with the expanded version of the group-position thesis, the root cause of minority-group relations with police is grounded in larger structures of inequality and in the convergence of interests between the dominant racial group and state institutions, with the police the most "visible sign of majority domination" (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 195). While specific reforms in policing may help to reduce misconduct and improve opinions of the police

Table 1 Recent attitudes toward policing, by race

	Blacks (%)	Whites (%)	Hispanics (%)
Not confident that police treat blacks and whites equally[1]	77	36	57
Societal race relations cause unjust police treatment of minorities[2]	71	30	57
Police killings of blacks a serious problem[3]	73	24	45
Police killings: isolated incidents	18	60	45
Police killings: sign of broader problem[4]	74	35	51
Altercations due to citizen resistance	19	60	NA
Altercations due to police misconduct[5]	68	28	NA
Police departments treat misconduct leniently[6]	70	27	NA
CJ system treats violent officers leniently[7]	70	32	NA
Too much media attention to police misconduct	13	52	33
Not enough media attention to police misconduct[8]	48	17	26
Media coverage of police biased in their favor	45	18	29
Media coverage of police biased against them[9]	13	54	26

[1]How confident are you that police treat blacks and whites equally (*Washington Post*, 2014).; [2]Problems with race relations in our society cause police to treat minorities unjustly (AP/NORC, 2015); [3]Police killings of blacks are a serious problem in the United States (BYP, 2016); [4]Police killings of unarmed black men in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City are isolated incidents or a sign of broader problems (*Washington Post*, 2014); [5]Bigger cause of violent encounters between people and police: people disrespecting police and not following orders or police treating law-abiding people like suspects and using force too often (*Washington Post*, 2015); [6]Police departments do a poor job in holding officers accountable for misconduct (Pew Research Center, 2014); [7]Officers who injure or kill civilians are treated too leniently by the criminal justice system (AP/NORC, 2015); [8]Over the last year, do you think the media has given too much, about the right amount, or too little attention to police misconduct (YouGov, 2016); [9]Do you think media coverage of stories involving law enforcement is more likely to be biased in favor of police officers, biased against police officers, or fair in the way police officers are represented (YouGov, 2016).

somewhat, profoundly improving blacks' and Latinos' relations with the police may require "making fundamental changes in entire modes of existence for millions of people" (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 204). This point was echoed in the recent report of a commission of inquiry into Chicago's police department, which called for "programs that address socioeconomic justice and equality, housing segregation, systemic racism, poverty, education, health, and safety" (Police Accountability Task Force, 2016, p. 18).

The group-position framework is illuminating not only with respect to civilians' intergroup relations and their orientations toward the police, but also with respect to the *police institution* in relation to civilians and, in particular, different racial groups. A long line of studies documents the existence of a robust police subculture—a fraternity that socializes new recruits to view themselves as the "thin blue line" and to develop an "us vs. them" mentality not only toward suspects but also, in a diluted form, toward the general public. This mindset is reflected in a recent survey that revealed that the overwhelming majority of American police officers (86%, $N = 7{,}917$) believed that the public does not understand police work or the risks officers face on the job, while two-thirds of the officers reported that they had been verbally abused by a civilian in just the past month (Pew Research Center, 2017). The us-vs.-them outlook is reflected in officers' consensus (92%) that recent public protests against police brutality are due to "long-standing bias against the police" (Pew Research Center, 2017).[8] Regarding group-position cleavages between the police and minority groups in particular, fully 80% of officers (and 92% of white officers) in this survey believe that no further changes are needed in American society to give equal rights to African Americans (Pew Research Center, 2017). The majority of whites (57%) but only 12% of blacks agreed, reflecting a huge gulf between whites and police officers, on the one hand, and African Americans, on the other, on the issue of racial equality.

We do not know how pervasive outright racial prejudice is among officers. But there is evidence—stemming from their cumulative experiences in disadvantaged minority neighborhoods or with minority citizens outside those neighborhoods—that officers tend to view minorities as "crime prone" and typify minority neighborhoods as both criminogenic and hostile to the police (e.g. Fassin, 2013; Moskos, 2008; Smith & Alpert, 2007). Research has documented the "ecological contamination" that occurs when neighborhood conditions (e.g. crime, disorder, dilapidation) are associated with the residents who live there, influencing how police officers treat these residents (Werthman & Piliavin, 1967). And officers are more likely to negatively rate their police department's relations with the local black and Hispanic populations (44 and 29%, respectively) than with the local white population (9%) (Pew Research Center, 2017).

8. One-third of the officers thought that an additional cause of the demonstrations was "a genuine desire to hold officers accountable for their actions."

Apart from these broad patterns, certain events can trigger a heightened sense of threats to police interests and, consequently, intensify group solidarity among officers in opposition to minorities. A recent study documents increased levels of police use of force against civilians in New York City in the aftermath of a killing of a police officer. Analysis of forms on which officers recorded contacts with civilians revealed that the use of physical force against blacks increased substantially after an officer was killed by a black suspect in 2007 and 2011, whereas the use of force against whites and Hispanics did not change. In two separate killings involving a white suspect and a Hispanic suspect, the subsequent use of police force against civilians remained unchanged. The researcher explains this finding as follows:

> I argue that racial bias in policing … fluctuates, partly driven by significant events that provoke intergroup conflict and foreground racial stereotypes. Events strengthen cohesion within the police department and invoke the notion of the police versus black youth. Police increase the use of force against minority groups to mitigate (perceived) threat, retaliate against the offending group, and preserve social order. (Legewie, 2016, p. 380)

The increased use of force against blacks after an officer is killed by an African American is a form of retaliation influenced by either outright racial prejudice or implicit bias that views blacks as violence-prone. To use Skolnick's (1966) seminal concept, these incidents crystallize the police perception that blacks are "symbolic assailants" based on an act of one actual assailant. The larger points here are that the group-position thesis can be applied to police officers as a group, not just civilian members of racial groups, and that the net effect of police practices is hierarchy-enhancing of the existing racial stratification order.

Minority-Threat Thesis

Blumer's group-position model highlighted the importance of threats to group interests, which Blalock (1967) later elaborated as a power-threat or *minority-threat thesis*. Dominant-group attitudes tend to be shaped by a need to defend the group against political and economic threats to its hegemonic position. The threat posed by a subordinate group consists of either a latent interest in or manifest efforts to gain opportunities or advantages, thus diluting the dominant group's supremacy. For the subordinate group, the dominant group presents an obstacle or threat to the realization of its interests.

Threat perceptions may be influenced by racial stereotypes. In the United States, blacks have long been considered criminally inclined by the white population (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997). Nearly half of whites expressed the view that blacks are "violence-prone" in the 2000 General Social Survey (the last year this question was asked). And the racial typification of crime also colors

popular culture and news media reporting, conditioning audiences to exaggerate the amount of crime committed by African Americans. The stereotype of "black criminality" has been well-documented in laboratory research on implicit bias: if the experimental actor is black, subjects are more likely to interpret ambiguous behavior as aggressive, perceive fuzzy images as guns and knives, and to shoot a firearm quickly at the black actor in a video simulation (Correll, Hudson, Guillermo, & Ma, 2014; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004). The parallel phenomenon of "implicit white favoritism" benefits whites, who are "disassociated with crime" and presumed to be law-abiding among other positive attributes (Smith, Levinson, & Robinson, 2015). Implicit white favoritism has been documented throughout the criminal justice system (Smith et al., 2015).

Further evidence comes from ecological studies. In areas with large numbers of minorities in the population, whites' fear of crime is higher than in other places (Chiricos, Hogan, & Gertz, 1997). A survey of residents of three cities found that the greater the proportion of young black men in a neighborhood, the higher the perceived amount of neighborhood crime; this finding held after controlling for neighborhood crime rates and was strongest for white respondents (Quillian & Pager, 2001).

For those who racialize crime and believe in the idea of "black criminality," there is an inclination to support harsh punishment of offenders (Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004) and to justify police suspicion, surveillance, and street stops of blacks. Disparate treatment is interpreted as justifiable, *rational discrimination*. For example, while many whites disapprove of racial profiling in principle, they nevertheless understand it as "a byproduct of neutral crime fighting activities" (Tyler & Wakslak, 2004, p. 275). These attitudes are fairly common among whites but vary in intensity. The most prejudiced group members are "more likely to want to see the legal system used to control these groups" (Cohn & Barkan, 2004, p. 37; cf. Barkan & Cohn, 1998, 2005; Unnever & Cullen, 2012). Notwithstanding these intra-group differences, for many whites crime control requires that law enforcement focus on minority individuals or minority neighborhoods.

The racial attitudes and threat perceptions of the dominant group can manifest themselves in the amount of formal social control directed at subordinate groups (Blalock, 1967). It follows that the magnitude of crime control in a locale will be shaped by the size and geographic distribution of the minority population and, hence, the level of economic and political threat perceived by dominant-group members; the higher the perceived threat, the greater the demand for robust crime control.

A body of research has produced somewhat mixed support for the minority-threat thesis across the criminal justice system (Liska, 1992; Stults & Baumer, 2007), but empirical findings specifically on policing are generally consistent

with the thesis.[9] These studies point to four main patterns: First, American cities with high percentages of black residents and/or low residential segregation, which may be viewed as threats to the dominant group, commit greater *resources* to the police (i.e. number of officers, expenditures) (Jackson, 1989; Jacobs, 1979; Sharp, 2006). A small black population and/or a high level of segregation helps to insulate whites and "should alleviate white pressure on political authorities to do something about crimes committed by blacks" (Kent & Jacobs, 2005, p. 736). Second, *arrest rates* are greater in cities with low levels of residential segregation or large black populations, controlling for the local crime rate (Liska, Chamlin, & Reed, 1985; Stolzenberg, D'Alessio, & Eitle, 2004). Third, citizen complaints regarding *excessive force* and the rate of *police killings* of civilians (and blacks in particular) increase as a city's minority proportion grows (Jacobs & O'Brien, 1998; Liska & Yu, 1992; Smith & Holmes, 2014). Fourth, other types of *police conduct* have been linked to minority presence. At the neighborhood level, a minority individual's presence in a white neighborhood may be deemed suspicious or threatening; this "out of place" thesis seems to explain higher stop rates of blacks and/or Hispanics in predominantly white areas (Epp et al., 2014; Ferrandino, 2015; Meehan & Ponder, 2002; Stewart, Baumer, Brunson, & Simons, 2009; Stults, Parker, & Lane, 2010). Similarly, when the proportion of minority residents increases, even slightly, in majority-white communities, this may generate a "defended neighborhood" response that translates into support for greater police control. Findings from Georgia and Iowa show an association between the recent growth of African Americans in predominantly white neighborhoods and police discrimination against black youths in those neighborhoods (Stewart et al., 2009). Studies of the role of "Hispanic threat" tend to confirm the above findings for African Americans, although the effect of percent Hispanic may be smaller than that of percent black (Johnson, Stewart, Pickett, & Gertz, 2011; Kane, 2002; Smith & Holmes, 2003, 2014; Stewart, Martinez, Baumer, & Gertz, 2015; Welch, Payne, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2011).

The fact that many blacks and Hispanics have long supported crime control measures in their cities and neighborhoods is irrelevant to the minority-threat thesis.[10] What is crucial for theoretical purposes is whether a group is

9. One deficiency in minority-threat studies is that they almost never measure a crucial stage in the process: citizen or police threat perceptions and the mechanisms whereby those perceptions shape criminal justice outcomes. Instead, macro-level factors such as percent minority or racial segregation are typically correlated with outcomes such as arrest rates. One exception is a study that found whites' fear of crime and perceived minority economic threat to be predictors of police force size across U.S. counties (Stults & Baumer, 2007).

10. For a history of black support for robust crime control, see Forman (2017). Today, blacks are much more likely than whites (61 vs. 28%) to say that the police who work in their community do only a fair or poor job in controlling crime (CBS News, 2014). Other surveys report that large proportions of African Americans support an increase in officers patrolling city streets, more police surveillance of high-crime areas, and harsher court sentences for criminals.

perceived as threatening to the interests of the dominant racial group or to the authorities.

In sum, the two theses highlight the principle that racial attitudes reflect not just individual attributes and beliefs but also a sense of intragroup linked fate and intergroup strain: (1) *perceived threats*: the dominant group's fear that it risks losing privileges or resources to competing racial groups, (2) *perceived advantages*: minority beliefs that their group interests depend on challenging the prevailing order, and (3) *police solidarity* vis-à-vis civilians in general and minority groups in particular. In all three cases, it is the perceived threat and advantage that predicts racial prejudice and discrimination, irrespective of actual threats. The core argument, again, is that criminal justice agencies do not simply respond to individuals or to isolated crimes, but are also responsive in a more subtle and diffuse way to a city's racial order and the interests of the dominant group. These roles may be performed with or without conscious intent on the part of the authorities.

A Sidebar: Dominant Nonwhite Groups

The composition of the dominant group raises an important theoretical question: When a city transitions from a majority-white to majority-black or -Hispanic population and when the power structure mirrors this shift (e.g. the mayor, city council, police chief), do police-citizen relations change in accordance with the city's new racial order? The group-position thesis is race-neutral, so if a previously subordinate racial group becomes truly dominant, it is predicted that the authorities in general and the police in particular will become attuned to the interests of the newly-privileged group—all else being equal. Unfortunately, there are almost no studies that test this hypothesis. We do know that the dominant group in white-ruled South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and Southwest Africa (now Namibia) was indeed dislocated and disadvantaged—formally and systematically—after blacks came to power in each country. Political, economic, military, and criminal justice institutions transitioned away from protecting white interests and instead engaged in at least some discrimination against the white population, most severely in Zimbabwe (Weitzer, 1990).

In the U.S., studies of citizens' perceptions and experiences of officers of different races have produced mixed findings—ranging from positive to neutral to negative assessments of same-race officers (e.g. Sklansky, 2006; Theobald & Haider-Markel, 2008; Weitzer, 2000). Here, however, I am interested in larger organizational changes. In the United States, it has been hypothesized that "a department with more black officers behaves differently from a department with fewer black officers. As blacks comprise a larger portion of a police department, they may become less isolated and more influential in shaping the values and culture of the entire police department" (Sherman, 1983, p. 221), potentially improving both police behavior and public confidence in the police.

If this hypothesis is confirmed, we would expect majority-black and majority-Hispanic departments to have at least a somewhat different orientation to the public than majority-white departments, all else being equal. Several big-city police departments are now majority-black or -Hispanic in composition (including Atlanta, Birmingham, Detroit, El Paso, Jackson, Memphis, Miami, New Orleans, San Antonio, Washington). But apart from a handful of studies (Frank, Brandl, Cullen, & Stichman, 1996; Legewie & Fagan, 2016), little is known about the effect of racial complexion on policing patterns or police-citizen relations.

One study compared a city with a majority-black population and police department (Washington, DC) to a city with a majority-white police department and no racial group in the majority of the population (Chicago) (Weitzer, Tuch, & Skogan, 2008). While police stop rates of citizens were similar across the two cities, African American opinion of the police was substantially higher in Washington. Indeed, blacks in Chicago were two to three times more likely to hold negative views of police services and community engagement as well as officer demeanor, fairness, and misconduct. White opinion was fairly similar between the two cities, but when it differed, Chicago whites were more critical.

Another comparative study examined two majority-black cities and police forces (Detroit, New Orleans) and two cities without black majorities and where the police force was majority-white (Chicago, Charlotte). Blacks' evaluations of the police were fairly consistent across the cities, whereas whites' had more negative views of the police in the two majority-black cities. Group-level racial attitudes were also examined, yielding a finding consistent with the group-position thesis:

> whites who perceive the most group conflict between whites and African Americans are more negative toward the police than those who perceive less conflict, but only in black cities. This makes sense given the historical position of whites as the privileged race in America. When whites live in black cities, they may see the police as less protective of their privileged position. The magnitude of these effects is quite strong. … In contrast, in the white cities, the effects of white racial attitudes on police evaluations are insignificant. (Howell, Perry, & Vile, 2004, p. 57)

Blacks' larger racial attitudes were not predictors of opinions of the police in either type of city.

These few studies lend support to the two theses, as applied to places where the dominant racial group is non-white, but much more research is needed to confirm these contextual effects. The following sections elaborate on the relevance of the two theses at different levels: situational, attitudinal, and political.

Encounters

The group-position/minority-threat theses apply not only to general patterns in group relations with the police but also can be extended to the situational dynamics of encounters. In *deference-exchange theory*, individuals are expected to defer to those in authority, while the latter are not expected to reciprocate—i.e. an asymmetical power relationship (Sykes & Clark, 1975). Several studies confirm the importance of such deference by subordinates, finding that citizen disrespect toward police officers tends to generate harsh reactions from them. When minority-group members encounter the police, they may reflect on whether the stop is related to their subordinate racial or ethnic identity and whether they are being treated similarly to their counterparts in the dominant group. At the same time, minority-group members often *expect* negative treatment in their encounters with police (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 120), and may thus interpret an officer's authoritarian or brusque demeanor—a standard part of officers' work persona—as an instance of racial bias. Stated differently, "The asymmetrical status norm, operative in most police-citizen encounters, is difficult [for minority citizens] to distinguish from the special asymmetrical status norm operative when ethnic subordinates interact with superordinates" (Sykes & Clark, 1975, p. 590).

This can result in an interactional spiral whereby a citizen's stereotypes of officers and expectations of unjust treatment precipitate belligerence or aggressive behavior, which in turn provokes a harsh police response. Drawing from a classic observational study of police-citizen interactions in three cities, one of the researchers noted, "In anticipation of harsh treatment, blacks often behave disrespectfully toward the police, thereby setting in motion a pattern that confirms their expectations" (Black, 1971, p. 1,109). Police officers likewise enter these encounters influenced by expectations of "minority threat" provocation, resulting in a similar self-fulfilling prophecy (cf. Legewie, 2016). The group-position thesis would predict that the wider the status gap between officer and citizen, the greater the chance of disrespectful behavior toward the other party, and "it is possible that particular types of citizens (e.g. young minority males) may act in disrespectful or otherwise resistant ways to symbolize their perceptions of injustice" (Engel, 2003, p. 477). The deference deficit on the part of some minority individuals is conditioned by ongoing patterns of insensitive or aggressive police behavior, such as repeatedly stopping and questioning minority individuals (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Ekins, 2016; Epp et al., 2014; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010).

While at least one study found no significant race difference in citizens' resistance toward officers (Paoline, Gau, & Terrill, 2016), others have found that individual African Americans as well as residents of disadvantaged black neighborhoods were less likely than whites and Hispanics to be compliant or to show respect toward police officers (e.g. Belvedere, Worrall, & Tibbetts, 2005; Engel, 2003; Reisig, McCluskey, Mastrofski, & Terrill, 2004; Sykes & Clark, 1975).

For example, an analysis of 313 video recordings of police interactions with drivers in Cincinnati found that, compared to white drivers, black drivers were less courteous, less apologetic, less respectful, and more belligerent toward officers (Dixon, Schell, Giles, & Drogos, 2008). This conduct is most likely to occur when minority citizens interact with white officers, insofar as the citizen interprets such officers' behavior as rooted in "the officer's own ethnic group's superordination" (Sykes & Clark, 1975, p. 590) and as a "visible sign of majority domination" (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 195). These larger meanings are confirmed or reinforced when the officer behaves in a callous or disrespectful manner. The Cincinnati study found that, when interacting with members of another race, both white and black officers displayed "more indifference to comments of the driver, were less approachable, were more dismissive of driver comments, showed a pronounced appearance of superiority, gave less respect, and did less listening" (Dixon et al., 2008, p. 541). A study of eight other departments found that black officers' use of force against noncompliant citizens did not vary by citizens' race, whereas white officers used higher levels of force against noncompliant blacks. The researchers argue that these findings may be due to white officers viewing "white suspects' offensive behavior [as] situation specific, whereas black suspects' actions indicate disrespect of the social order at large" (Paoline et al., 2016, p. 5). In other words, from the officer's standpoint, encounters with African Americans may combine individual-level minority threat (noncompliance) with perceived, diffuse resistance to the prevailing stratification order.

Citizens' experience of encounters with the police, therefore, can be partly explained by deference exchange theory: a withholding of the deference expected by authority figures, conditioned by racial group membership, is a form of minority threat that often provokes harsh police responses that confirm minorities' expectations of racial bias.

Orientations

The group-position thesis does not imply that minority-group members are monolithically critical of the police, but it does predict that they will tend to view the police more unfavorably than whites and that they will be inclined to see the police as a "visible sign of majority domination" over their group (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 195). Many blacks and Hispanics view the police as contributing to their subordination through the use of both legal and improper methods; perceive misconduct as a serious problem; and believe that their group interests will be advanced by greater controls on police.[11]

11. Each of these patterns is well-documented in opinion polls and academic surveys, some of which are included below.

Beliefs about policing and support for reform are rooted in a desire to gain improvements in their group's treatment by the police.

Reflecting Bayley and Mendelsohn's "different worlds" construct, when asked to list the three most important problems facing the country today from a list of 22 issues, African Americans (aged 18–30) listed racism (49%) and police brutality (45%) as the two most important; similarly, the top three for Latinos included racism (31%) and police brutality (27%). But for whites, neither racism nor police brutality were salient (instead: terrorism, education, national debt) (BYP, 2016). In the same poll, three times more blacks than whites considered police killings of blacks an "extremely serious" problem in the United States (Table 1).

Support for the police is typically strong within the dominant group, whose members tend to see the police as allies in the fight against crime. If the police operate in ways that bolster the status quo structure of white privilege, it follows that, when the police are criticized, whites may perceive their group interests as indirectly threatened. Although group members vary in their willingness to internalize group membership, and some members act against their group interests, the group-position thesis predicts that whites will *tend* to align with the police and doubt or dismiss allegations of police misconduct. In fact, surveys consistently show that the *majority and sometimes overwhelming majority* of white Americans reject criticisms of the police and see them as neutral actors, whereas blacks and Hispanics are much more likely to find policing problematic. Table 1 reports recent survey findings that confirm these divergent orientations. In one of the few surveys to include both civilians and police officers—asking whether killings of unarmed blacks were "isolated incidents" or "a sign of broader problems"—whites' views closely align with those of police officers: 60 and 67%, respectively, take the isolated-incidents position.

Support for Reforms

Despite their tendency to dispute charges of police misconduct and to doubt the need for reforms, many whites nevertheless support a wide variety of initiatives. Equipping officers with body cameras, for example, is endorsed in two polls by 90% and 93% of whites (CBS News, 2014; *New York Times*/CBS News, 2015), and the appointment of outside prosecutors to investigate police killings is supported by over four-fifths of whites (Ekins, 2016, p. 58). Similarly high proportions of whites (along with blacks and Hispanics) endorse demilitarization, retraining, civilian complaint review boards, racial diversification, early-warning systems to identify deviant officers, and various forms of community policing (AP/NORC, 2015; CBS News, 2014; Ekins, 2016; *New York Times*/CBS News, 2014, *New York Times*/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2016; *Washington Post*/ABC News, 2014).

What is especially noteworthy is the overall *cross-racial agreement* on the value of these reforms. At first glance, this may seem inconsistent with the theoretical propositions advanced here. It can be explained, I argue, by drawing on the race relations literature that documents discrepancies between white support for principles and practices. Although there may be some social-desirability bias in support for reforms (favoring them because it is socially unacceptable not to), the main explanation appears to be a genuine acceptance of "sensible" reforms that are difficult to contest in principle. Examples include community policing, body cameras, demilitarization, and improved training. Given the high level of support for these policies, it appears that people do not define them as weakening law enforcement. But support for a reform does not necessarily translate into support for procedures to implement it. For example, while nearly 80% of whites subscribe to the idea that a city's police department should be similar to the racial composition of the city, implementing this policy by giving minorities preferences in hiring is supported by only 21% of whites (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006, p. 139). Affirmative action for minorities is viewed as impinging on whites' group interests.

The Racial Politics of Policing since Ferguson

This final section argues that elements of both group-position and minority-threat are reflected in the racial politics of criminal justice since Michael Brown's killing in Ferguson in August 2014. Blumer pointed to the "crucial role of the 'big event'" in the public arena in awakening "strong feelings of identification with one's racial group" (Blumer, 1958, p. 6). A sucession of such "big events"—i.e. highly-publicized police killings—has occurred since 2014, the cumulative effect of which appears to have crystalized both racial-group identification and divergent assessments of these incidents. In a 2016 survey, for example, whites were more likely than Hispanics and blacks to say that currently there is a "war on police" in America (64, 52, 46%, respectively) and that people show "too little respect" for the police today (64, 45, 34%) (Ekins, 2016, p. 76). The post-Ferguson trend lines also diverge by race: comparing pre-Ferguson polls (2012—2014) with post-Ferguson polls (2015—2017), confidence in the police declined for blacks and Hispanics, but increased slightly for whites (Gallup, 2017). The stable support among whites may be due a diffuse defensive reaction to the critical discourse and physical attacks on officers since Ferguson.

Because of the history of racialized policing in America, "Brutality and profiling are so familiar to many blacks, that they constitute chronically accessible 'scripts' that are frequently primed and likely to guide interpretations of ambiguous events" (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010, p. 121). Such scripts are evident in recent declarations by activists, media figures, and some politicians. While many of their criticisms of the police have been sound and highlight the need for serious reforms, it is also true that protestors in the streets, civil rights

leaders, journalists, and commentators in the media have routinely advanced generic claims lacking an evidence basis or appropriate nuance. That the United States has 18,000 police agencies and about 800,000 police officers and that there is considerable variation among them is a fact that has been missing from the public debate, which consistently portrays "the police" monolithically. In the past few years, the most popular scripts have been the following:

Sweeping generalizations: Police misconduct is alleged to be widespread and systemic, and specific incidents are depicted as examples of universal problems. Citizen interpretations of a specific incident are prone to "ultimate attribution error," where an entire group (in this case, the police) is blamed for a member's actions. After one killing, for example, Malik Shabazz, President of Black Lawyers for Justice, declared that "American police were hunting black men 'like a deer or a dog'" (quoted in Knapp, 2015). Reporting on a killing in Chicago, *New York Times* reporters stated that the incident "exposed a deeper culture of secrecy and impunity in Chicago that implicated the entire police force and much of the city's government" (Davey & Smith, 2016). The *Washington Post's* (2016) editorial board claimed that Chicago's police department "suffers not from a few bad apples but from a rotten culture of racist policing and official impunity." And generalizing about policing nationwide, the *New York Times* (2016) editorial board stated, "The shootings seem part of some gruesome loop of episodes of law enforcement gone amok." Note the indictment of "American police," "entire police force," "rotten culture," and "law enforcement gone amok." These claims are consistent with the opinion of the majority of African Americans that killings of unarmed blacks are a "sign of broader problems," not "isolated incidents" (Table 1).

Presumption of officer guilt: Accused officers are presumed guilty both prior to an official investigation and after an investigation exonerates an accused officer. When it was announced that charges would not be brought against the officer who killed Tony Robinson in Madison, Wisconsin, one protester filmed on the street in May 2015 shouted, "This is *not* what democracy is about," which clearly presumes that the officer should have been prosecuted. After a Tulsa officer was acquitted of manslaughter in the 2016 videotaped killing of Terrence Crutcher, protesters outside the courthouse chanted "No justice, no peace, no racist police" (CBS News, 2017). Presumption of guilt is also apparent in the public's reaction to the failure to convict any of the six officers involved in the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore. This single outcome led to "less faith in the criminal justice system" for three-quarters of young adult blacks and Hispanics nationwide (BYP, 2016).

Historicizing current incidents: During a protest in Milwaukee, a woman with a poster picturing black slaves remarked that police shootings of blacks made her feel like "we're back in chains" (quoted in *New York Times*, 8/15/16) Similarly, Carlos Moore, a lawyer for the family of Antwun Shumpert (killed in Tupelo, Mississippi), linked the killing to historical lynching and the legacy of the Ku Klux Klan and added, "They have declared open season on us, and they are killing us with impunity." The reporter who wrote the article quoting

Moore argued that Shumpert's "killing echoes some of the cruelest episodes of the South's past" (Fausset, 2016).

Confirmation bias is evident in perceptions of both the killings and official responses to them. Whether the authorities delay release of a videotape or release it quickly, whether they quickly name the officer or not, whether they prosecute the officer or decline to do so, whether a prosecuted officer is acquitted or convicted—*all* such actions have been interpreted as confirming the officer's guilt, and some of these actions are also viewed as confirming the larger belief that the entire criminal justice system is broken.[12]

Police officers routinely challenge these scripts and substitute their own: (1) the presumption of innocence, (2) the iconic rotten-apple, rogue-cop account, or (3) the "split-second syndrome" whereby an endangered officer must act quickly, thus deserving the benefit of the doubt (cf. Waegel, 1984). Insisting that each incident is exceptional and episodic, police chiefs have a vested interest in rejecting the notion that there may be systemic problems in their department. Similarly, leaders of police unions typically defend accused officers in public pronouncements and cover the costs of their legal representation. Unions have fiercely rejected inquiry findings that misconduct in a department is part of a larger "pattern-and-practice," as documented in the Justice Department's recent critical assessments of several police departments (Baker, 2015). After five police officers were killed in an ambush in Dallas in July 2016, the National Association of Police Organizations issued a statement suggesting that the Black Lives Matter movement was partly responsible for the deaths and for fostering a wider "war on cops." As noted earlier in the article, a large survey of police officers across the United States reported that they were almost unanimous in believing that individuals who have participated in public demonstrations against police brutality are motivated by "long-standing bias against the police."

Insofar as they see the police as allies in the fight against crime, whites may draw on the same scripts and act as champions of the police when they come under criticism, such as supporting the police Blue Lives Matter campaign. As a white woman stated, "We should be supporting our police officers. I think that it has blown up every time that a black individual is killed. It's blown up in the news. But you don't hear about the whites that have been killed" (quoted in *New York Times*, 8/17/16, p. A9). In the same article, a 65 year old white man explicitly linked allegations regarding police killings to larger racial issues:

> Every night in Milwaukee there is someone being shot [by civilians] and they make nothing of that until a cop is involved and then all of a sudden it's always blamed on the cop. If somebody is killed, they [blacks] think we [whites] owe

12. The scripts presented here reflect recurrent themes in the recent racial politics of policing, but I make no assumptions regarding their validity with respect to particular incidents.

> them something. I don't want to seem racist or nothing but the black heritage has been raised in a certain way that there's no incentive to get out and work because all of a sudden you have five kids and there are no dads around.

These quotations explicitly invoke larger group-position comparisons (white vs. black) in defense of police actions.

When asked whether the recent public protests after high-profile police killings had brought attention to the issue in a mostly positive or negative way, blacks were much more likely to view them positively: 51%, compared to 21% of whites. The majority of whites (59%) viewed the demonstrations negatively (AP/NORC, 2015). Regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, only 14% of whites strongly support the movement (26% are somewhat supportive), compared to 41% of blacks (and 24% somewhat) (Pew Research Center, 2016). The lukewarm support among whites for the *movement* contrasts with the survey evidence (cited above) that large majorities of whites support many of the *reforms advocated* by Black Lives Matter (BBC News, 2015). This disconnect may be a function of whites' taking umbrage at the tone of the activists' critique of the police or an association of the movement with the rioting that occurred after police killings in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Milwaukee.

A recent study of residents in the St. Louis area before and after the Ferguson killing used the group-position framework to explain black-white differences on a host of issues related to both policing and the protests following the killing of Michael Brown. As expected, white opinion of the police was not shaken by the killing (it improved slightly), whereas blacks' views of the police "drastically worsened" after the incident (Kochel, 2017, p. 13). Regarding the protests following the killing, two-thirds of whites disapproved of them, two-thirds supported the controversial police tactics used to control the civil unrest, and the qualitative data revealed strong white identification with the police. By contrast, three-quarters of African Americans criticized the police response to the protests, singling out excessive force, paramilitary tactics, and police provocation of protestors. The author concludes that Brown's killing is

> symbolic for his racial group, appearing to reflect a white government official (majority power group) acting against the "out" minority group … consistent with group position theory, while majority [white] residents held stable views and sustained diffuse support for police and the criminal justice system. (Kochel, 2017, p. 18)

Finally, race matters in how people assess media reporting on the police. More than half of the white population but very few blacks believe that the media have given "too much attention" to recent incidents of police misconduct (see Table 1). Three times as many blacks as whites believe that too little attention has been devoted to this problem. Police officers are much closer to whites on this question, with 80% of officers in an earlier nationwide poll ($N = 920$) agreeing that the news media are "too concerned with police

brutality" (Police Foundation, 2001). Moreover, about four times as many whites as blacks believe news reporting has been "biased against the police"; much smaller proportions of whites consider the coverage either fair or biased in favor of the police, compared to almost half of blacks who see it as favoring the police. On each of these questions, the proportion of Hispanics who take these views falls somewhere between that of blacks and whites (Table 1). Illustrating the group-position thesis, members of the dominant group tend to think the media pays too much attention to or is biased in favor of minority individuals and against the police, arguably because they perceive the police institution as serving their interests generally or because they believe police actions are rational responses to minority individuals' criminal offending or resistance to officers' commands.

Conclusion

The article points to the importance of enhanced theorizing in the area of race and policing. I draw on minority-threat and group-position theses to elaborate what I consider an indispensable foundational perspective on the ways in which racial groups in the United States (and arguably other multiracial societies) perceive the police generally, experience interactions with officers personally and vicariously, and interpret publicized incidents involving other citizens. The theoretical framework provides a valuable lens for understanding both modal racial-group relations with the police and larger material and symbolic group interests. There is no question that variables other than race (e.g. age, gender, neighborhood) influence individuals' perceptions and experiences with the police, and I make no assumption that members of a particular racial group share a single orientation toward the police or toward other racial groups.[13] It goes without saying that some group members take positions contrary to their group's traditional interests. Yet the findings presented here also show that a substantial and sometimes overwhelming proportion of each group subscribes to a predominant framing of policing issues in the United States. On most of these issues there is a wide racial gulf.

One exception is the broad consensus on most proposed reforms. I have argued that the explanation for white support for reforms is that it is simply difficult to oppose them in principle; they can be endorsed on the basis of "common sense" professional policing—not as weakening the capacity to fight

13. Research on the effect of social class on individuals' perceptions of the police has produced mixed results, but the socioeconomic status of one's residential neighborhood is a robust predictor in many studies. Residents of middle-class or affluent black neighborhoods may have much better relations with the police in their neighborhood than when they travel outside their neighborhood and encounter an officer, demonstrating the importance of individual characteristics vs. neighborhood context (e.g. Meehan & Ponder, 2002; Weitzer, 1999).

crime. At the same time, however, large numbers of whites doubt that the reforms are really necessary, since they are inclined to discount the existence of serious or systemic problems in the first place. Thus, they give lukewarm support to "good policing" norms while also doubting that much needs to be fixed.

Bayley and Mendelsohn's (1969) seminal study was pessimistic regarding the possibility of substantial change in fundamental group-level orientations to the police. Their emphasis on the imperative of addressing the structural roots of racial inequality as a precondition for major improvements in police—community relations is worth reiterating, since it is central to the two theses' focus on group interests and threats to those interests. In addition, the historical legacy of policing in the United States—still quite salient for minority communities—will continue to shape, at least to some extent, relations with the police. Reforms can improve such relations, but cannot fundamentally alter the deeper structural inequality and associated inter-racial discord highlighted by the theoretical perspective advanced here.

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