

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: The Effects of Viewing a Police Officer on Attitudes Toward The Police:

Does Gender and Previous Trouble With the Law Matter?

Abstract approved: 

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of viewing a police officer on attitudes toward the police and whether gender or previous trouble with the law made a difference in the way participants answered a survey. Participants were 53 undergraduate students in introductory psychology courses. Students were divided into an experimental group and a control group, in which both groups filled out a two surveys. Both groups were given surveys in the same manner; the only difference was that the experimental group had a police officer sitting in the room. Past research indicated that there tends to be a difference in behavior when being observed. Thus, I hypothesized that participants in the experimental group would have more positive attitudes than the participants in the control group; I found this to be significant. Past research has also indicated a difference between gender attitudes toward the police, in which females would report more positive attitudes than males. Focusing on this as one of my hypotheses, I found no significant differences of attitudes between gender. Along with gender and observation research, negative attitudes toward the police have been confirmed when participants have had previous trouble with the law. I came up with a hypothesis stating that participants with previous trouble with the law will have more negative attitudes toward the police than participants without trouble with the law; no significant results were found.

The Effects of Viewing a Police Officer on Attitudes Toward the Police: Does Gender and  
Previous Trouble With the Law Matter?

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A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Psychology

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

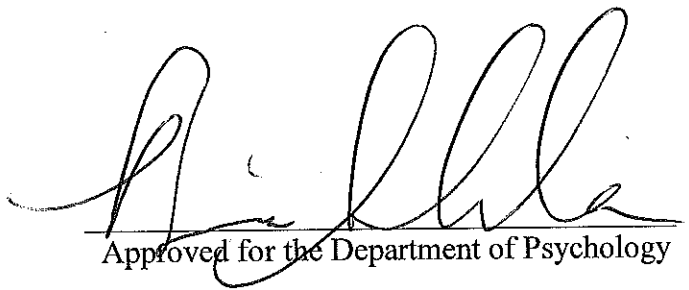
Master of Science

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by

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Approved for the Department of Psychology

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Approved by the Dean of the Graduate  
School and Distance Education

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction**

Police officers are required to interact with the public and often these interactions stir up conflict that police officers do not intend, but that the public perceives as conflict brought on by the police officers themselves. How the police handle conflict situations may change the way the public views them (Wilson & Gross, 1994). Previous studies have focused on how race, age, and neighborhoods affect perceptions of police officers (Seron, Pereira, & Kovath, 2004). Numerous studies focused on attitudes toward police officers' abuse of authority (Cox & White, 1988; Klockars, 1984; Phillips, 2010; Seron, Pereira, & Kovath, 2004).

Abuse of authority is defined as using a person's appointed position and/or power for an improper purpose. For example, police officers may use verbal abuse by lying, persuading, and even forcing citizens to do what they ask of them even if it is not the right thing to do. Physical abuse of authority may include things such as tightening of handcuffs, hitting and slapping, and pushing the citizen around (Klockars, 1984; Seron, Pereira, & Kovath, 2004). Whether it is physical or verbal, abuse of authority has shown that it can sway citizens' outlook on how they rate police officers in general.

It is important to investigate the differences in perceptions of police officers between males and females because police officers may then know how to act in certain situations. Knowing the nature of these differences could eventually change the way police officers handle each gender when coming across conflict situations. Something as simple as creating confusion as to why there is a police officer in the room may manipulate the way participants view police officers.



There has been an abundance of research concerning police officers' physical abuse of authority but minimal research regarding verbal abuse of authority. These studies explore how the media can make police officers look "aggressive" and "macho." They also explore the idea of thoughts and attitudes from grade school students to high school students (Amoroso & Ware, 1981; Phillips, 2010; Scharrer, 2001). Only a few studies have actually focused on differences between gender perceptions and attitudes toward police officers and abuse of authority.

Attitudes and thoughts on police officers in general as well as their abuse of authority can depend on many factors such as race, socioeconomic status, age, previous experiences and encounters with police, gender, and much more (Lia & Zhao, 2010). The purpose of this study is to find out whether gender, race and the presence or absence of a police officer plays a role on participants' views of police abuse of authority. While doing research and looking closely into these variables as possible effects on attitudes toward police officers we can offer new implications.

Very little research has been done regarding gender and perception of police officers while having a police officer present in the room. What has been researched is citizens' perceptions of police officers and perceptions of abuse of authority and power and how they actually feel when it comes to power being used in certain situations (Cox & White, 1988). When police interact with civilians, they are prohibited from using any sort of unnecessary force, such as abuse of authority and language that may be offending to any victim or suspect at hand (Seron, Pereira, & Kovath, 2004). Is it possible that the media effect's people's ideas of police officers? Scharrer (2001) explained how police characters portray masculine men as "macho" and "aggressive." He said that the

stereotype in the media portrays justifiable police violence on television and in the movies. In other words, police officers believe that their actions are always correct. The characters on television are used to portray hyper masculinity, which can lead to increased portrayal of abuse of authority (Scharrer, 2001).

### **Observation and Reactivity Effects**

Reactivity may have an impact on observational data. In other words, being observed could possibly have an impact on the way participants behave or think depending on who is watching them (Jacob, Tennenbaum, Seilhamer, Bargiel & Sharon, 1994). It may be only natural to behave differently when we are around certain people, people we don't know, or authority figures for that matter. Furthermore, Jacob et al. (1994) investigated whether family behavior would be altered in response to random or fixed recordings. They found that there was no dramatic difference between a family that knew when their behavior was being observed and a family that did not know when their behavior was being observed and only recorded.

Johnson and Bolstad (1975) compared behaviors of families who were recorded at home in two different situations: An observer being present and an observer being absent. In efforts to find a behavior and reactivity effect, Johnson and Bolstad (1975) found a difference only when an observer was present. When the observer was present, parents spoke in a quieter voice and engaged in less yelling and negative language.

It seems that reactivity has an impact on families being observed for a short period of time. Gittelsohn, Shankar, West, Ram and Gynwali (1997) observed families for seven days focusing on families in the region of Nepal and on children's food and health behaviors in their household. Ten male high school graduates went through a three

month training process in which they were taught how to use the experimenter's behavioral instrument that included different behavior measurements.

Gittelsohn et al. (1997) used three levels of reactivity for the end of the day observations; these three levels were low, moderate, and high levels of reactivity behaviors. Low level of reactivity included children watching the observer, moderate level of reactivity included conversation with the observer, such as asking for favors, and high level of reactivity included children or families changing their behaviors for the interest of the study, such as changing their methods in feeding or preparation of foods.

Although Gittelsohn et al. (1997) indicated overall low reactivity for the seven day observation, the first day's observation produced a considerable amount of reactivity. Researchers believe that the high reactivity for the initial observation day could have been because of the families' perception that they were disturbing the observer. Nonetheless, observers found that families altered behaviors in some way while being observed. Given this research, the present study predicts that the presence of a police officer in the room might create a reactivity effect; participants who view a police officer may rate them differently than those who do not.

### **Attitudes Toward Police**

Numerous previous studies have investigated citizens' attitudes concerning police officers. For example, Westmarland (2005) developed a questionnaire containing eleven different scenarios pertaining to police officers. These 216 men and 43 women who participated in this questionnaire from the United Kingdom were asked to respond to the scenarios by indicating whether they thought the situations were justified or whether they would report the police officers. At the end of the questionnaire they were free to provide

additional comments or answers indicating why they chose the answer. Westmarland (2005) found that when the first set of scenarios dealt with rule bending or minor disciplinary matters, respondents thought that these were actually less serious than other scenarios, which included officers bribing others. Sixty percent of respondents stated that this was very serious and that they were more likely to report them.

Scenarios in the study from Wilson and Gross (1994) included variables that had been known to influence participants' behavior in previous research. Reactive violence and proactive violence were both initiated by offenders in the scenarios presented. Wilson and Gross (1994) found that officers who were put in situations with young females and males and who were resistant tended to exhibit behaviors that were conflict escalating with the participants. For police officers, those who had highest resistance from female and male participants seemed to think that arrest was the best option in this situation, resulting in low verbal abuse or physical altercations between them and the participants in the situation.

Zamble and Annesley (1987) conducted a study with 317 participants from big (several million people) and small (about one hundred thousand people) cities in Canada to see whether attitudes toward police, in general, differed within big and small cities. In their study, four versions of the questionnaire were given and each participant completed one version that was given to them randomly. These questionnaires consisted of demographic questions, general attitudes toward the police and their performance, biographical questions, and attitudes toward police power.

After analyzing the data, Zamble and Annesley (1987) found that the smaller city held a significantly higher positive attitude toward the police in general ( $p < .001$ ) and the

local police ( $p < .05$ ) than the bigger city. Reported frequencies of reading newspapers and viewing the news reports on television were highly correlated with attitudes toward police in general ( $p < .01$ ) and attitudes toward police powers (Zamble & Annesley, 1987). Another finding concluded that those who had been accused at a criminal trial had significantly less positive attitudes toward the police and their powers.

Albrecht and Green (1977) used a 9 item Likert scale to measure attitudes toward the police. An example of an item included “police in this community do an excellent job of enforcing the law” (Albrecht & Green, 1977, p. 74). The above item indicated that more than sixty percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while seventy five percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I have little respect for the police in this community” (Albrecht & Green, 1977, p. 75). Albrecht and Green (1977) found that those who were more likely to hold the least favorable attitudes toward the police were those who lived among poor urban areas and minorities, while the most favorable attitudes held toward the police were those living in a rural area and also those of urban middle class.

### **Age, Gender, and Previous Law Encounters**

Focusing on crime conditions, gender differences, socio-economic status, and influenced attitudes from negative experiences that might affect one’s attitude toward the police, Avdija (2010) sent out a questionnaire including 141 items. Of the 305 surveys distributed, 169 consisted of male and 135 consisted of female undergraduates enrolled in liberal studies. Avdija (2010) found that in general, females were less likely to have positive attitudes toward the police than males. The researcher also found that having a higher socioeconomic status was related to positive attitudes toward the police.

also found that having a higher socioeconomic status was related to positive attitudes toward the police.

A study with 832 students (58.3% female, 41.7% male) from a student population from a medium sized state university investigated the relationships between traffic citations and attitudes toward police, verbal abuse, and what the victim thinks as an unfair decision by the police (Cox & White, 1988). Sixty five items on the questionnaire measured participants' attitudes, judgments, and also perceptions about police officers' fairness and honesty when it comes to preventing crime and during investigations (Cox & White, 1988). The authors used scales that ranged in various amounts of points that measured the attitudes toward the police officers.

Cox and White (1988) found that there was some difference between participants who had received traffic citations and those that had not when it came to the Attitudes Toward Police (ATP) scale in general. They also found that participants who received traffic citations had negative views against police conduct, which also held the perception that police officers may behave at an abusive level whether that be physically or emotionally (Cox & White, 1988). The authors predicted that there would not be any relationship between participants' attitudes toward the police and whether they believed they had been victimized by unfair decisions that the police may have made. This hypothesis was rejected as they found that this scale showed significant results ( $p < .001$ ).

Phillips (2010) found that when police officers use excessive force they are unlikely to report it to a supervisor for fear that it would be considered unnecessary force. When police officers were asked about whether they would report unnecessary force of

their partner to a supervisor, less than 15% said that they would be likely or very likely to report the behavior (Phillips, 2010). Additionally, 40% of the behavior was verbal abuse, 30% slapping (physical abuse), and another 30% punching (physical abuse). Peterson (2008) explained that action and danger are appealing to police officers and most of the time police work is very boring, so when something comes along that may be exciting to them they want to be the first to be involved. Confrontation from police and delinquents bring “moments of intensity” to an otherwise boring day which could lead to unwanted behaviors (Peterson, 2008).

Authority is defined as the form of domination and control marked by unquestioning law, recognized by those who are asked to obey and neither coercion nor persuasion is needed (Klockars, 1984). Although most police work does not involve persuading and forcing citizens and criminals to do something unjustly, police still get the chance to lie and most of the time they avoid punishment because of the way they have justified the situation (Klockars, 1984).

Seron, Pereira, and Kovath (2004) explained that the public expresses a low tolerance for police misconduct, such as the unnecessary use of force. Ninety three percent of these public respondents said that they do not approve of an officer “striking a citizen.” A survey from New York City residents asked respondents to rate misconduct on a seriousness scale that started from zero (no serious misconduct) to ten (serious misconduct). Seron, Pereira, and Kovath found a positive effect when it came to the respondents rating of unnecessary use of force, pushing, hitting or slapping, tightening handcuffs, officer not following procedure, threatening behavior by officer, explicit offensive language, and implicit offensive language.

Coa and Huang (2000) used a multiple regression analyses to study the phenomenon of citizens' complaints of police abuse of power. A survey of citizen's complaints about police was given using stratified sampling techniques. The citizen complaint rate went up when there was a larger population that the police had to serve (Coa & Huang, 2000). They also found that education level of females did not significantly affect the citizens' complaint rate. Females with bachelor's degrees did not have a different complaint rate than those with less education. Some interesting data that Coa and Huang came across was that the police departments that require citizens to provide evidence before filling a complaint had fewer complaints.

A statewide random sample of 892 households was surveyed three different times over a four-month period regarding perceptions and attitudes of state police (Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996). In this study Correia, Reisig, and Lovrich indicated that females were less likely to have positive attitudes toward state police than males, and that Caucasians compared to non-Caucasians have a higher likelihood of positive perceptions and attitudes toward the state police. Any form of negative contact with the state police, such as receiving a traffic citation increased the likelihood that individuals' perceptions would be negative (Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996).

### **Minorities and Attitudes**

Could minorities have more negative attitudes toward police because they believe they are treated differently? According to Holmes (1998) minorities have higher contact rates with the police and have negative attitudes toward them. For example, black males were subjected to interrogation on the street and more likely to be frisked or handcuffed once police thought of them as suspects. Although Holmes (1988) demonstrated that



Hispanics have negative attitudes toward police officers, Lia and Zhao (2010) found that Hispanic were the least likely to have negative attitudes compared to Caucasians and African-Americans.

Dowler and Sparks (2008) asked the question "In general, how satisfied are you with the police who serve your neighborhood?" Responses from both male and female of all race were high with 65.8% reporting being "satisfied" and 21.4% were "very satisfied." Association between race and police satisfaction was significant and found that African-Americans and Hispanics were less satisfied with the police than Caucasians (Dowler & Sparks, 2008). Dowler and Sparks found in their demographic model that males were the most dissatisfied with the police, while older respondents reported higher satisfaction with officers.

In general, findings from various studies suggest that African-Americans have negative attitudes toward the police, and have lower overall satisfaction with police officers (Liu & Crank, 2010). According to Liu and Crank, people with previous negative experiences with the police, whether the outcome is negative or positive, tend to remember the negative experiences more than the positive, which then transfers into negative attitudes toward the police. Liu and Crank explained how negative attitudes affect African-Americans when police officers do not act in accordance with expectations of how an officer *should* act in a given situation. Middle and upper class African-Americans have higher expectations for the police than lower class African-Americans, however (Liu & Crank, 2010).

While conducting a telephone survey (Eschholz et al. 2002), respondents were asked questions that pertained to the amount of hours they watched reality police

programs such as COPS and America's Most Wanted. The mean hours spent watching these shows was 1.4 hours, which is approximately 3 shows a month. People who watched the reality police programs were younger and more likely to be African-American men. People in the general sample who had viewed reality police programs had a higher confidence rate toward law enforcement (Eschholz et al., 2002). Testing showed that viewers of the police programs were influenced by the media, and that sex, race, and education played a role in influence. White males who had less than a college degree showed positive attitudes toward reality police programs, while African-American men and women were not affected by these programs in any way, even though African-American men had the highest percent of views when it came to the programs (Eschholz et al., 2002).

Research previously conducted within the last 20 to 30 years also compared big city attitudes and small city attitudes toward police in general and their local police (Zamble & Annesely, 1987). Parker, Onyekwuluje, and Murty (1995) examined African-American attitudes toward the police and their behavior in two large cities, Atlanta, Georgia and Washington, D.C. In their study, participants were asked three questions asking them to rate, on a 3-point Likert scale, police officers behavior as smart or dumb, friendly or unfriendly, and kind or cruel.

Parker, Onyekwuluje, and Murty (1995) found that African-Americans were more likely than Caucasians to be negative and critical of police officers. African-Americans were also more likely to report the police abusing their authority to search them without reason and also using insulting language when speaking with them (Parker, Onyekwuluje, & Murty, 1995).

Lia and Zhao (2010) used the neighborhood context model to attempt to examine relationships between neighborhoods and their related indicators and also public attitudes toward the police. Neighborhood indicators included personal experiences, victimization experiences, fear of crime, actual crimes, and economic disadvantage. Seven hundred fifty six questionnaires were completed through phone surveys on the ratings of the Houston Police Department. Lia and Zhao found what most other researchers have not and that is people in the area of Houston actually held “favorable” attitudes toward the Houston Police Department. Half of these respondents from the survey were men and, twenty-one percent of the respondents claimed that they or their family members had been a victim within the past 12 months prior to the survey. The socioeconomic condition or status of a respondent did not seem to have an effect on negative or positive attitudes toward police officers.

Schuck, Rosenbaum, and Hawkins (2008) asked respondents a series of questions about police and policing in their Chicago neighborhood, and “attitudinal” and “perceptual questions.” While measuring for attitudes toward the police, Schuck, Rosenbaum, and Hawkins found that there were four factors that played a role in determining these attitudes. The first factor (neighborhood) made up 37% of the variance and included questions about policing in their neighborhood. The second factor (global) was about the police worldwide, which made up 13% of the variance. Both the third and fourth (policing services and fear) factors together made up 8% of the variance and consisted of police services with minorities and poor neighborhoods, and the fear of police (Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008).

Based on these results, African-Americans and Hispanics were reported to have more fear of the police than Caucasians when it came to attitudes toward police worldwide. Also, attitudes toward the police were significantly related to race, social class level, and disadvantage neighborhood (Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008). Overall negative attitudes toward the police were more likely to come from African-Americans who represented 35% of respondents.

Although there are many different predictors of people's attitudes about the police such as age, criminal background, socioeconomic status, neighborhood context, and victimization; gender has hardly been studied as part of a larger predictor. Gender and previous encounters with the law also seem to be the least studied variables when explaining attitudes toward police; most research has been done with race/ethnicity.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Knowing that previous research has shown that participants with traffic citations had negative attitudes toward police (Cox & White, 1988), one of the hypotheses was formed based on law encounters. Given the dearth of research concerning gender effects, I also decided to investigate gender as a naturally occurring independent variable. I was especially interested in determining whether or not the presence of a police officer would influence participants' reported attitudes, and if a reactivity effect would be different between the genders. That is, would females react differently than males when a police officer was in the room? I was additionally interested in observing any difference between Caucasians and ethnic minorities in my study. Therefore, I developed the following research questions and hypotheses:

- Is there a difference in the self-reported attitudes of participants when a police

officer is present in the room versus when there is no police officer present? In other words, is there a positive reactivity effect?

- Are there differences in the attitudes of women and men with regards to attitudes about police officers?
- Do females and males report a different reactivity effect? That is, do gender and group interact?
- Do participants with previous law encounters perceive police officers in a different way than participants with no previous law encounters?
- How do ethnic minorities differ from Caucasians when it comes to attitudes toward the police?

*Hypothesis 1:* Participants in the experimental group (with a police officer present in the room) will have more positive attitudes toward the police than those in the control group (without a police officer present in the room), which according to previous research on observation and reactivity effects could support this hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 2:* Females, in general, will have more negative attitudes toward the police, than males.

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be an interaction effect of gender and group on participants' attitude toward police.

*Hypothesis 4:* Participants who have previous encounters with the law will perceive police officers more negatively as opposed to participants with no previous encounters with the law.

*Hypothesis 5:* Ethnic minorities will perceive police officers more negatively than Caucasians.

This research could possibly help police departments improve their image within the communities they serve. Results could indicate that police officers need to alter their behavior when interacting with women, ethnic minorities or those with previous trouble with the law.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

#### **Participants**

The participants consisted of college students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses in the spring of 2013 at a midsized Midwestern University. Participants signed up through the department Blackboard website (this is an online system that allows students to sign up for participation in psychological studies) for this study. Participants picked a day and time that worked for them and there was no indication as to whether they were signing up for the experimental or control group. Out of the 53 participants, 19 were male (35.8%) and 34 were female (64.2%), while only 11 participants consisted of ethnic minorities (20.8%), this included African-American, Asian, and Hispanic. Age of participants ranged from 18 to 29 ( $M = 19.9$ ). After reviewing all participants' police and demographic surveys, none of the participants' data had to be removed. Over half of the participants had previous encounters with the law (56.6%), ranging from minor traffic tickets to DUIs (Driving Under the Influence) and battery.

#### **Materials**

There were two groups in this study: an experimental and a control group. I gave participants a "Demographic Survey" (Appendix A) that asked about each individual's age, race, gender, and year in school. Also, I administered a survey I created myself, "The Police Survey," since there were no standardized surveys available that asked the type of questions I wanted to investigate (Appendix B). In the survey, there were six Likert scale questions and two open ended questions dealing with attitudes toward police

officers, such as “In your opinion, what makes a good police officer?” and “Have you or a family member ever been in trouble with the law?” Reliability analysis was conducted by using Cronbach’s alpha on the Police Survey’s six question Likert-scale items that made up the participants’ total attitude. The reliability coefficient of Cronbach’s alpha for “The Police Survey” was .69, confirming that the measure has fair internal reliability.

The experimental group was given the exact same surveys in the same manner; the only difference was they viewed a police officer sitting at the front of the room. The police officer in uniform was a bald 27 year old white male with a mustache. He sat expressionless in a chair with no smile or frown. He faced the students during the entire session and did not talk to any of the participants or the experimenter.

### **Design and procedure**

This study used an independent factorial design. I performed a factorial ANOVA for hypotheses one, two, and three. For hypotheses four and five I conducted independent *t*-tests. Independent variables for this study included group (control vs. experimental), which I manipulated, and the naturally occurring independent variable of the participants’ gender (female vs. male), trouble with the law (previous experience vs. no previous experience) and race (Caucasian vs. ethnic minorities). The dependent variables for this study included all six Likert-scale responses on The Police Survey, which attempted to measure participants’ perceptions and attitudes toward the police. I conducted the study in a cross-sectional manner in which surveys were handed out to participants and completed within one time period. I chose this methodology because of low cost, while the survey maintains a consistent focus with the questions chosen.



I obtained approval for this study via Emporia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix C). While the experimental group had an officer sitting in the front of the room, I did not explain why he was there until after the experiment was over. I then read the informed consent forms, which I had already placed at their desk before they arrived (see Appendix D); after the participants read and signed the consent forms, I handed out both the demographic survey (see Appendix A) and "The Police Survey" (see Appendix B). After they completed the surveys I instructed the participants to leave them at their desk. Once this was completed, I passed out and read the debriefing statement (see Appendix E) explaining the purpose of the study; then told the participants they were free to go. The same exact procedures were conducted for the control group. Participants were assured they were free to leave any time during the study and they may do so without any penalty. After gathering data from both groups, it was then coded and entered into a statistical software program, SPSS. I ran a factorial ANOVA and *t*-tests analyses in order to test the hypotheses.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

After reviewing all participant surveys, I did not have to remove any of the participants' data because all surveys were filled out completely and correctly. The total number of participants remained at 53.

I averaged responses to the six Likert scale questions on the Police Survey across questions to create a total score for "attitudes about the police," which served as the dependent variable for all analyses. I then conducted a two (control vs. experimental) X two (female vs. male) factorial ANOVA in order to test the first three hypotheses (see Table 1).

For the first hypothesis, I predicted that participants in the experimental group would have more positive attitudes toward the police than the participants in the control group. The hypothesis was supported with a main effect for group in my factorial ANOVA,  $F(1,52) = 3.68, p = .03$ . This indicated a significant difference between groups for overall attitude of participants, in which the experimental group indicated more positive attitudes toward the police, supporting previous research (see Table 2).

For the second hypothesis, I predicted that women would have more positive attitudes toward the police, than male participants. The test for a main effect for gender was nonsignificant  $F(1,52) = .88, p = .35$ , which indicated that the mean scores for females were not significantly different than those for males (see Table 2).

Table 1

*Factorial ANOVA of Total Attitudes of Participants by Group, Gender, and Interaction*

*Effect*

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Group	5.59	52	5.59	3.68	.03
Gender	1.34	52	1.34	.88	.35
Interaction Effect	.33	52	.33	.21	.65

Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations of Total Attitudes by Group and Gender*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Experimental ( <i>N</i> = 23)	5.30	1.05
Control ( <i>N</i> = 30)	4.54	1.34
Female ( <i>N</i> = 34)	5.07	1.10
Male ( <i>N</i> = 19)	4.56	1.50

The third hypothesis predicted an interaction effect of gender and group on participants' attitudes toward police. As seen in Table 1, the interaction effect was not significant,  $F(1,52) = .21, p = .65$ . I did not find any mean differences for female and male participants based on group membership (see Table 3). Hypothesis three was not supported.

Fourth, I hypothesized that participants who had previous encounters with the law would perceive police officers more negatively than participants with no previous encounters with the law. I conducted an independent  $t$ -test, pairing participants' ratings of attitudes toward the police. The test did not indicate significant findings where  $t(2,51) = 1.44, p = .16$ . Those with previous trouble with law ( $N = 27$ ) indicated lower ratings of police ( $M = 4.65, SD = 1.19$ ) than those with no prior experience with trouble with the law ( $N = 26; M = 5.14, SD = 1.32$ ) but the differences were not significant, although it was close ( $p = .08$ ).

Finally for my fifth hypothesis, I suspected that the ratings of attitudes toward the police from ethnic minorities would be less positive than the ratings of Caucasians. After running an independent  $t$ -test, there was no significant difference between attitudes of ethnic minorities and attitudes of Caucasians  $t(2,51) = 1.06, p = .29$ . The sample of ethnic minorities was small ( $N = 11$ ), however, and only included one African American. The means rating for minority participants was slightly less ( $M = 4.53, SD = .48$ ) than for Caucasian participants ( $M = 4.98, SD = 1.16$ ) but not significantly so ( $p = .20$ ).

Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviations of Interaction between Gender and Group*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Control		
Female	4.80	1.18
Male	4.28	1.52
Experimental		
Female	5.34	.96
Male	5.17	1.37

## CHAPTER 4

## DISCUSSION

My study sought to support researchers such as Schuck, Rosenbaum, and Hawkins (2008), who reported that African-Americans and Hispanics had more fear of the police, which led them to have more negative attitudes toward the police. However, there was a lack of ethnic minorities in my study, with only eleven participants reporting a different race other than Caucasian, and only one African American participant. I also designed the study to see whether gender made a difference in participants' attitudes toward the police.

Although I had no significant gender differences in this study, some previous studies indicated that females had less positive attitudes toward the police than males (Avdija, 2010; Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996). Further, previous experience with the police via "trouble with the law" did not reach the level of significant differences as compared to those with no prior trouble with the law. I did support my hypothesis concerning a reactivity effect, however, with participants who viewed a police officer in the room reporting more positive attitudes than those in a control group who did not view a police officer. I will discuss my results by hypothesis as follows.

**Hypothesis 1.** In the first hypothesis, I investigated if the physical presence of a police officer in the room would cause participants to report different attitudes toward police officers on their surveys. More specifically, I predicted that the presence of a police officer in the room (experimental group) would influence participants' responses on an attitude survey, resulting in more positive attitudes than a control group who did not view a police officer.

The study indicated that there was a significant difference in overall attitudes toward the police. Participants in the experimental group reported having more positive attitudes toward the police than participants in the control group, which supported my hypothesis. This supports the idea that reactivity as discussed in the introduction (Jacob, Tennenbaum, Seilhamer, Bargiel & Sharon, 1994) could have taken place because of the observation of the police officer sitting in the front of the room. This could have direct application for police departments who may be suffering from image problems. The results of this study indicate that a neutral, benign interaction with a police officer influenced participants' attitudes in a positive direction. Further research should expose participants to a positive interaction with a police officer and see if attitudes improve even more. Police departments could then increase the exposure of police officers in the community, perhaps through increased volunteerism, while in uniform, to improve image.

**Hypothesis 2.** I hypothesized that females would have a more negative attitude toward the police than men. Although my study did not support this hypothesis, the study from Avdija (2010) found females enrolled in a liberal studies program reported negative attitudes toward police more than male students. Perhaps with larger participant size there would be a better chance of this hypothesis supporting the previous research. Also, I had fewer male participants ( $N = 19$ ) than female participants ( $N = 34$ ). Of course, it could be that the female participants in my study simply did not view the police officer in a more negative way than the male participants.

**Hypothesis 3.** My third hypothesis predicted a significant interaction effect between group and gender. That is, that males in the experimental group would report



different attitudes than females in the experimental group. Likewise, I predicted females and males in the control group might report different attitudes toward the police. I did not predict a direction for this hypothesis and did not find a significant difference. This could be a positive result for police departments; they can focus on exposure to a police officer, as outlined above, without specifying a different type of interaction with the police for women and men in a community.

**Hypothesis 4.** A student population at a medium sized university filled out a questionnaire asking about traffic citations that they have received in the past and also their perceptions of police, including judgments and attitudes toward the police (Cox & White, 1988). After reading this study, I decided to include a hypothesis that examined previous law encounters and attitudes toward police. Specifically, I predicted participants who had previous encounters with the law would perceive police officers more negatively as opposed to participants with no previous encounters with the law.

Unfortunately for my study, there was not a significant difference between participants who had had previous encounters with the law and participants who had not. Cox and White (1988) had a significantly larger sample of students at 832. These participants also had a questionnaire that included sixty-five items that were in greater detail than my own survey. Including more questions in my survey could have possibly increased the chance that there would be a difference between participants. A better definition of "trouble with law" may have helped; most of my participants only experienced minor traffic violations. Dividing groups by those with more serious past troubles, those with less serious past troubles and those with no trouble may be helpful to future researchers. Of course, it could be that participants in my study do *not* have a more

negative view of police officers even if they have previous trouble with the law. Although with a  $p$  level of .08 in my study, I would recommend replicating the experiment with a sample of participants on parole (for example) versus those with no previous trouble with the law whatsoever.

**Hypothesis 5.** Previous research indicates that ethnic minorities have a more negative attitude than Caucasians when it comes to the police (Dowler & Sparks, 2008; Holmes, 1988; Parker, Onyekwuluje, & Murty, 1995; Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008). Although previous research indicates that ethnic minorities will have more of a negative attitude toward police than Caucasians was not supported in this study.

The variety of ethnic minorities in my study was greatly hindered. Only one of the participants was African-American, two Asian, and the rest reported Hispanic ethnicity. Given the amount of research indicated that ethnic minorities have a more negative attitude toward the police than do Caucasians, I would caution the reader to interpret this result conservatively. My samples size was extremely small and young, and also made up of college students, not individuals living in varied conditions. Future research is still needed in this area.

### **Limitations**

The primary issue in this study is the low number of participants. Also, the number of women was close to double the number of men in both groups. Students in this experiment were only representative of freshmen and sophomores at this midsized Midwestern University, as the sample only consisted of freshmen and sophomores with the exception of one or two juniors and seniors. This University may not be representative of other Universities. Because I had low participant attendance, I also had

a low number of ethnic minority participants, (N = 11). This did not represent ethnic minorities very well, even though this University has a predominantly white student body.

I designed and created both the demographic survey and questionnaire “The Police Survey.” This could be another potential problem because I did not pilot test either survey and there was no testing to ensure external validity for “The Police Survey,” I was not able to test external validity for my scale and I suggest future research consider using the scale with some other standardized scale to test for correlations between the two.

Further in “The Police Survey,” I asked the question “Have you ever been in trouble with the law?” I then gave examples of things that participants may get in trouble for, such as a DUI, but some participants who had only received warnings from speeding reported that they had previous trouble with the law. A better definition of “trouble with the law” could have been provided along with numerous choices of “crimes” that ranged in severity. It could be that individuals who experienced trouble with the law beyond a simple traffic or speeding ticket may have had more negative attitudes toward the police. A sample of individuals on parole might also add to the strength of testing this difference.

Another limitation in this study may have been the gender or appearance of the police officer. Answers to the survey questions may have been different if a female police officer was sitting in the front of the room instead of the male police officer. Also, the mustache and baldness of the police officer might have come across to participants as an intimidating factor, whereas a police officer with no facial hair could have seemed more laid back to the participants. No participants made any comments about the appearance of the police officer, however.

### **Future Implications**

For future research, it would be better to have close to 200 participants, with larger numbers of ethnic minorities. While participants in this study consisted mostly of freshmen and sophomores, it might be of prevalence to make an announcement that the study would be open to all class rank and majors at a University or even better tested with the general public. Also, it would be wise to run a pilot study and external validity analysis with changes to “The Police Survey,” and better defining the “trouble with the law” question so that responses may be clearer in the future.

Ultimately, adding another group to this study with a female officer may create more research questions as well as influence participants’ answers. Not only would we be able to see how a female officer would manipulate answers, but we would be able to compare participants’ attitudes towards female and male officers. Most research with police officers and attitudes do not make gender of the police officer a central variable of their research, leaving us to imagine what a police officer looks like to us.

Personally I gained interest in this topic while reading the study conducted by Cox and White (1988). Although this was an older study, it was one of the only studies that focused on previous law encounters and attitudes toward the police. Their main focus was on attitudes related to number of traffic citations participants had received. In general, Cox and White (1988) found some differences in attitudes with participants receiving traffic citations. Including different types of previous trouble with the law could affect attitudes toward the police, such as participants with previous DUIs or various battery charges. Including these variables might change attitudes toward the police

drastically. This research could indicate different attitudes depending on the different encounters with the law.

Finally, without overstating the importance of this small study, I would suggest that police departments make use of this finding and expose their officers to the citizens they serve in various neutral or positive interactions. This could be a low cost way to improve the police department's image overall or at the very least of its individual officers. The results of my study indicate that there is nothing to lose by entertaining this solution to image problems of police departments across the United States. I would also recommend studying the reactivity effect with regards to the police officers' attitudes about those that they serve. Perhaps a neutral or positive interaction with a community member will lead to a more positive attitude towards members within that community, in general. If this finding were significant, it could be a powerful tool in battling the negative attitudes (on both sides) experienced by ethnic minorities that were indicated in previous research.

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Appendix A  
Demographic Survey

**Demographics Survey****Name:**

1. Gender (please circle one):      Female      Male

2. What is your ethnicity?

4. What is your age?

5. What is your year in school (please circle one)?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Graduate Student

Appendix B  
The Police Survey

**Please read the questions carefully and answer them to your best ability. There are more questions on the back side of this page.**

**Police Survey**

A. Have you ever been in trouble with the law? Please indicate what kind of trouble you or your family has been in. (I.e. traffic tickets, DUI, MIC, Battery, Substance related)

B. If so, how many times?

C. Has a family member been in trouble with the law?

D. If so, how many times?

1. How comfortable do you feel around police officers?

Not comfortable			Neutral			Very Comfortable
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

2. Do you think police officers are generally kind to other people?

Never			Neutral			Always
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

3. How often do you think police officers make the correct choices on the job?

Never			Neutral			Always
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

4. How often do you think police officers abuse their power of authority?

Never			Neutral			Always
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

5. Do you have respect for police officers?

No respect			Neutral			Extreme respect
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

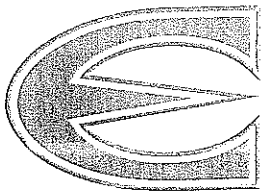
6. What is your overall attitude toward police officers in general?

Very Negative			Neutral			Very Positive
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

7. In your opinion, what makes a good police officer?

Appendix C

IRB Approval Letter



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February 6, 2013

Brooke Kent  
Department of Psychology  
Campus Box 4031  
Emporia State University  
Emporia, K.S 66801

Dear Ms. Kent:

Your application for approval to use human subjects has been reviewed. I am pleased to inform you that your application was approved and you may begin your research as outlined in your application materials. Please reference the protocol number below when corresponding about this research study.

Title:	Mr. Police Officer
Protocol ID Number:	13054
Type of Review:	Expedited
Time Period:	11/21/2012 - 11/21/2013

If it is necessary to conduct research with subjects past this expiration date, it will be necessary to submit a request for a time extension. If the time period is longer than one year, you must submit an annual update. If there are any modifications to the original approved protocol, such as changes in survey instruments, changes in procedures, or changes to possible risks to subjects, you must submit a request for approval for modifications. The above requests should be submitted on the form Request for Time Extension, Annual Update, or Modification to Research Protocol. This form is available at [www.emporia.edu/research/irb.html](http://www.emporia.edu/research/irb.html).

Requests for extensions should be submitted at least 30 days before the expiration date. Annual updates should be submitted within 30 days after each 12-month period. Modifications should be submitted as soon as it becomes evident that changes have occurred or will need to be made.

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I wish you success with your research project. If I can help you in any way, do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Michael Butler  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

pf

cc: Dr. Pamelyn MacDonald



Appendix D  
Informed Consent

Informed Consent**Study Name:****Faculty Researcher(s):** Dr. Pamelyn MacDonald**Student Researcher(s):** Brooke Kent**Telephone Number(s):****E-mail(s):** pmacdona@emporia.edu, bkent@g.emporia.ed

The Department of Psychology at Emporia State University supports the practice of protection for people participating in research and related activities. This study has been reviewed to determine that it poses little or no risk of harm to you. Any information obtained from you will be kept strictly confidential. Although you may be assigned an arbitrary participant number to assist in data collection, we assure you that neither your name nor participant number will be associated in any way with any reportable results. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study.

You will complete two brief surveys about you and police officers. Your participation should take approximately 30 minutes. **You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you may do so without penalty.**

You will gain no benefits by participating in this study other than educational (or credit if it is offered by your instructor), and other options are available from your instructor. The researchers are obligated to tell you as much as you care to know about the study after your part in the study is complete. If you would like a written summary of the results, please include your name and address in the space provided, and the researchers will send you a copy when it is available.

All persons who take part in this study must sign this consent form. In addition, person's under the age of 18 also must include the signature of a parent or legal guardian. Your signature in the space provided indicates that you have been informed of your rights as a participant, and you have agreed to volunteer on that basis.

*"I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach."*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

For persons under the age of 18:

*"With my signature, I affirm that I have read and understand my child's rights and the study described on the other side of this page, and voluntarily agree to allow my child (or legal guardian) to participate in this research study."*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Guardian (if participant is a minor)\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

For written summary of results:

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

ESU student e-mail \_\_\_\_\_

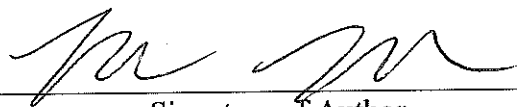
Appendix E

Debriefing Statement

Debriefing Statement  
Mr. Police officer  
Spring 2013

Thank you for participating in this experiment. Amoroso and Ware (1981) found that females rated police officers positively when it came to rating their perceptions of them, as opposed to males. I wanted to know whether viewing a police officer would influence attitudes that men and women have toward the police. I expect to find that women will perceive police officers more negatively than men will. Please do not share this information with anyone outside of this study as it may influence his or her behaviors. If you have any questions, you may contact me at [bkent@g.emporia.edu](mailto:bkent@g.emporia.edu) or Dr. MacDonald in her office (VH326), e-mail ([pmacdona@emporia.edu](mailto:pmacdona@emporia.edu)). Thank you again for your participation.

I, Brooke Emily Kent, hereby submit this thesis/report to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available to use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, digitizing or other reproduction of this document is allowed for private study, scholarship (including teaching) and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential financial gain will be allowed without written permission of the author. I also agree to permit the Graduate School at Emporia State University to digitize and place this thesis in the ESU institutional repository.



Signature of Author

5/3/13

Date

The Effects of Viewing a Police Officer on  
Attitudes Toward the Police: Does Gender  
and Previous Trouble With the Law Matter?

Title of Thesis

Signature of Graduate Office Staff Member

Date Received