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Objective

This study seeks to examine how student officers (recruits) develop self-legitimacy. Self-legitimacy can be understood as the belief that one's position of power is rightful; that is, morally justified within a normative framework of belief. This study of self-legitimacy explores how power-holders (e.g., the police) justify their authority to themselves and their audiences (e.g., the public). To date, research on self-legitimacy tends to find positive correlations between higher police self-legitimacy and, for example, greater support for suspect rights (Bradford and Quinton, 2014).

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Background

The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin prompted global protests, movements to “defund the police”, and calls for less punitive crime control (for example, see JohnJayREC, 2020). This crisis of legitimacy again raised the issue of racist police practices and the overreliance on force. These high profile cases combined with widespread public condemnation of the police may undermine police officer's own views about the legitimacy of their authority and reduce their willingness to cooperate with the public (Wolfe and Nix, 2016). In addition, the role of the police has been significantly expanded to include policing public health mandates, such as compliance with COVID-19 restrictions (Kyprianides et al., 2021).

Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) have convincingly argued that legitimacy is an ongoing dialogue between power-holders (e.g., the police) who make claims to possess legitimate authority and their audiences (e.g., the public) who respond to those claims. For instance, the members of the public may view the policing of violence as legitimate, but the policing of public health mandate as less legitimate. Thus, interactions between the police and the public help shape the public's views of the police and the officer's sense of their own legitimacy (Tankebe, 2019).

Expanding on studies about the public's perceptions of police legitimacy (Mazerolle et al., 2013), researchers have begun to explore how police self-legitimacy is cultivated and the influence it has on attitudes and reported behaviours (Tankebe, 2019). For example, higher police self-legitimacy has been linked to greater support for procedural justice (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). In another study, negative media publicity was found to reduce the police's willingness to engage with communities, but fair treatment from the police organisation and higher self-legitimacy appears to counter it (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). More recently, police fears of appearing racist have been linked to lower self-legitimacy and greater support for coercive policing (McCarthy et al., 2021). Conversely, a recent study on

policing COVID-19 found that higher self-legitimacy was associated with increased support for police use of force and lower officer well-being (Kyprianides et al., 2021). The authors speculate that officer's with “excessive confidence” may not be able to change rapidly enough to shifts in the external environment (e.g., a global pandemic). In short, police self-legitimacy may help promote procedurally just policing, lower support for use of force, and insulate officers from negative media publicity.

Method

This study took place between 2018 and 2019 with Greater Manchester Police at the Sedgley Park Training Centre. While this study uses a mixed methodology (inc. longitudinal surveys), only the qualitative data is reported here. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in private with 26 student officers out of a class cohort of less than 100. The interviews included questions about the role of the police, the rightfulness of police authority, the role of the public in policing, the use of force, and the causes of crime. A thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis program.

Selected findings

A thematic analysis of the interview data revealed a number of interesting findings; this paper will detail five. First, in terms of justifying their power, the student officers viewed their authority as necessary for a well-functioning society (n=21) and to protect people (n=19). Additionally, they felt that their authority is morally justified because it is constrained by the law, accountable, and carried out with the consent of the public (n=19). In turn, the participants suggested that abuses of power could undermine their belief in the rightfulness of police power (n=12). As one explained, “corruption in police and corrupt constables can make you doubt whether there should be anyone in society that have those powers over other people” (Interview 10).

Next, the students hoped to become ethical (n=19) and effective (n=18) officers. By ethical, they imagined themselves developing into approachable (n=6) power-holders that were fair (n=7), trustworthy (n=5), and empathetic (n=4). For the participants, being effective meant being competent (n=11), solving crime (n=11), and helping people (n=8). They saw themselves more as problem solvers, than crime fighters.

Third, the respondents felt that the ability to use force was a necessary, but unfortunate, component of policing. It was necessary to carry out one's duties (n=18), to protect oneself (n=11), and to protect others (n=9). They felt that any use of force needed to be justifiable (n=9), proportionate (n=9), and that it should be escalated upwards (n=7). A smaller number expressed stronger discomfort with the use of force, but still acknowledged its necessity (n=5). As one detailed, “it's constantly drilled into you through all your training, and especially from what you learn on the job, that your communication is

always your first weapon against people” (Interview 23).

Fourth, the future officers shared a strong commitment to the requirements of their new role. They overwhelmingly reported that their duty would take priority over their personal morality (n=20).

Finally, the analysis revealed that the participants largely viewed crime as the result of tragic circumstances. This included issues related to poverty (n=17), upbringing (n=13), and substance misuse (n=8). For instance, one said, “some people who have such a bad start in life that [crime] was almost inevitable” (Interview 17).

Discussion and future research

This study sought to use qualitative data to better understand how police view the nature and legitimacy of their role in modern-day policing. The findings indicate that the student officers draw a sense of legitimacy from a belief that they fulfil a crucial function in society, that they protect people, and that they wield “bounded authority” (Trinkner et al., 2018); that it, it was important for them that their authority is limited by the constraints of the law and the consent of public. They wished to become ethical and effective officers that wield constrained power. For them, it was important that their authority was obtained and exercised with references to shared social values (Beetham, 2013).

Critical to the issue of power-holder legitimacy, Muir (1977, pp. 3–4) argued that ‘good’ police officers require two virtues: first, to develop a “tragic perspective” by being able to “grasp the nature of human suffering”; and second, to be able to “resolve the contradiction of achieving just ends with coercive means.” Officers who fail to integrate the use of force and a tragic view into their moral framework may develop strategies of avoidance, conciliation, or coercion. These student officers viewed crime as largely a product of tragic circumstances that meant that people required help, rather than punishment. In addition, to fulfil their duties, they viewed the use of forces as necessary for protecting themselves and others.

Until recently, research on police self-legitimacy has been ignored in favour of studying public perceptions of the police. While this study is small in nature, it acts as a starting point for future studies that seek to better understand how officers view their authority and the potential steps that a police organisation might take towards cultivating officer self-legitimacy. Self-legitimacy has been tied to a range of positive behaviours, including respect for suspect rights and a preference for non-coercive behaviours (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). Yet, paradoxically, excessive officer self-legitimacy may lead to rigidity and an increased willingness to use force to fulfil their duties (Kyprianides et al., 2021).

Thus, further research is necessary to better understand how officers develop self-legitimacy and to examine the causal relationships between self-legitimacy and police behaviour. To date, self-legitimacy research is predominantly survey-based and would benefit from longitudinal research, field observations, and triangulation with staff records (see Muir, 1977). In turn, this research could be used to develop training, policies, and practices that improve the relationship between the public and the police through a dialogic understanding of police legitimacy. Without legitimacy, ‘policing can very easily become part of the problem of order, not part of the solution’ (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2017, p. 63).

Limitations

There are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the findings are limited to a single cohort of student officers from Greater Manchester Police and therefore the generalisability of the findings are limited. Second, the participants were not randomly selected and therefore may not be reflective of the wider cohort. Third, while attempts were made to reassure participants that their data would be anonymised and that their participation would not have any institutional repercussions, they may have given socially desirable responses.

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