'ARE THEY TRULY OUR FRIENDS?' A PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE IN THE POLICE

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─**Abstract**─

Citizens' confidence in the police is a fundamental requirement for effective policing in modern societies. While this argument holds true for most legal and criminological perceptions in South Africa, research studies have hardly considered how specific segments of the population, particularly university students, view the police. This study was therefore aimed at determining the extent to which university students' perception of the police shaped their confidence in the South African Police Service (SAPS) as an institution. A quantitative approach was adopted for the study. Data were obtained from participants through a convenience sampling technique. A sample of 682 participants was drawn from one of the largest universities in South Africa for a cross-sectional survey. The data were used to assess whether students' personal encounters with or vicarious knowledge of the police influenced their confidence in the procedural fairness, effectiveness and trustworthiness of the members of this institution. It was found, amongst others, that the students did not have a favourable disposition towards the police and that this negative attitude reduced their confidence in the police. Students' negative perceptions were shaped by their personal experiences of police corruption and brutality and this diminished their trust in the police. Increased levels of fear due to escalating crime also had a

negative impact on their confidence in the SAPS. The implications of these findings for policing in contemporary South Africa are disconcerting, and the study thus confirms that the police-student relationship in South Africa needs to improve. For example, the police should adopt more proactive methods and a conciliatory approach when engaging with students while carrying out their constitutional responsibilities, whereas students, without breaking the law, should adopt a more permissive approach when making their voice heard.

KeyWords: university, students, police, confidence, South Africa,

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1. INTRODUCTION

The police play an important role in society as they are charged with the responsibility of protecting lives and property. They are also expected to assist the public in order maintenance and crime control by ensuring that there is compliance with societal established norms (Murphy, 2015; Walker & Katz, 2012; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). To be efficient in executing their duties, the police often rely on the cooperation of the public. However, such cooperation cannot be achieved with brute force, but requires collaboration and mutual respect between the police and the public. While the public is expected to report any suspicious activity or incidences of crime and victimisation to the police, the latter is expected to be effective in the execution their duties (Walker & Katz, 2012). Moreover, the police are expected to respect people's rights and adopt methods that are fair in order to elicit public support.

Because police-public cooperation is pivotal in achieving a crime-controlled society, it is imperative to understand the nature, extent of, and motivations that will drive cooperation. While studies have investigated why people cooperate with the police in developed countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia and Canada), little is known about cooperation with and attitudes towards the police in transitional African societies. The few studies on this topic that were conducted in Africa focused on the general population (Boateng, 2013; Tankebe, 2013; Tankebe, 2010), with little consideration for specific segments of society. While the findings of these studies are important in measuring the extent of public cooperation with the police, there is a need to consider the views of specific segments of the population, with particular reference to university students who have historically been volatile in raising their voice against perceived political and societal injustices. The rationale for the study was the need to establish whether university students – who may later become

policy makers, technocrats or academics − have a sound understanding of the dynamics of policing in contemporary times. More especially, the significance of these citizens' cooperation with the police in combating crime in society needed to be explored.

Similar to experiences in most transitional African societies, police officers in South Africa face significant challenges that require the voluntary cooperation of the youth, especially university students (Bello & Steyn, 2019). However, conflict and animosity often discourage students from supporting the police during crime control operations, and this sustained strained relationship has the propensity to exacerbate university students' assessment of the police (Bello & Steyn, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the study utilized data collected from a sample of 682 students at one of the largest universities in South Africa to explore their perceptions of the police and how these perceptions influenced their confidence in and respect for members of the SAPS. The study also attempted to determine whether students' perceptions could eventually shape their willingness to cooperate with the police in order maintenance and crime control.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Policing and students' attitudes in South Africa

The relationship between the police and a majority of university students has inarguably been excessively troublesome in South Africa in recent times (Bello & Steyn, 2019). There is broad consensus that, even in developed Western countries, the police-student relationship has been characterised by conflict and confrontation and that this has resulted in low ratings of the police by students (Murphy, 2015; Hurst & Frank, 2000). Most university students are young and opinionated, and many are thus more amenable to violent behaviours, crime and victimisation to achieve political/societal goals than adults (Murphy, 2015). Students are often implicated in acts that contravene the law such as flouting traffic rules, engaging in alcohol and drug abuse, sexual violence, and public disturbances (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008; Murphy, 2015).

Given the fact that students tend to congregate in public places for demonstrations or protests against poor service delivery, or to vent their frustrations on university management and the State over unfulfilled promises, they are likely to attract police attention (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008; Murphy, 2015). Such protest actions also recently pitted students against the police in South Africa, especially when they breached the law and constituted a threat to public order and security. Police actions to contain student demonstrations and protest actions have

often portrayed them as antagonists, even when they were deployed to protect lives and property (Murphy, 2015). These encounters generally sullied the police-student relationship and ultimately engendered pessimistic and biased opinions about the police among students (Noorman, 2009). For instance, university students' low level of confidence in the police may be linked to their experiences during recent 'fees must fall' protest actions (Lange, 2017). These protests exacerbated the conflict between SAPS officers and university students as the police sometimes fired teargas and rubber bullets to disperse student protesters even when the protests were seemingly peaceful (Bello & Steyn, 2019; Lange, 2017). This provocative police response often aggravated the situation and often caused peaceful protest actions to erupt into full-scale student-police face-offs (Bello & Steyn, 2019). The SAPS is therefore faced with the task and repsonsibilty to adopt more proactive and effective strategies in order to foster a healthy and mutually supportive police-student relationship.

2.2. Procedural justice and cooperation with the police

The importance of procedural justice in shaping the public's willingness to cooperate with the police has been extensively explored in legal-criminological literature (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Broadly speaking, procedural justice is concerned with the fairness of the procedures adopted by the police when making decisions that affect people who have direct or indirect contact with them. Studies on procedural justice have opined that citizens are more likely to cooperate with or defer to the police when they perceive police procedures and attitude to be fair (Tyler & Murphy, 2011; Reisig & Lloyd, 2009). Public opinion is also formed and judgement of the decisions of the police are influenced when people experience or have vicarious knowledge of how the police treat people (Boateng, 2016). Citizens are thus more likely to cooperate with or defer to the police when they perceive the judgement of the police to be fair and respectful. It is noteworthy that studies have shown that citizens' willingness to cooperate with the police is determined by their perception of the procedural fairness of the police rather than by other variables such as police effectiveness and performance (Akinlabi, 2017; Boateng, 2016).

According to Murphy (2015) and Tyler (2003), the significance of procedural justice lies not only in fostering public compliance with the law, but it also increases the perceived legitimacy of police actions and authority. Tyler (2004) refers to four fundamental characteristics identified in empirical criminological studies that shape citizens' assessment of the fairness of procedural justice. The first is the extent to which citizens can *participate* in the process of explaining and

giving their account of any situation to police officers (Tyler, 2004). The second is shaped by individuals' assessment of the *neutrality* of police officers in a situation; thus whether the police are objective and fair in the decisions they make and whether all parties are treated equally (Tyler, 2004; Herbert, 2006). Thirdly, citizens expect police officers to treat them with *respect*. Thus people's rights should be respected and they should be approached by the police in an appropriate manner. Finally, the procedures followed by the police should be fair, as only then will citizens trust or have confidence in the motives of the police and the decisions they make. Citizens should thus experience legal authorities as *caring* (Tyler, 2004; Murphy, Murphy & Mearns, 2010; Jacobsen, 2015).

Studies have shown that citizens' experiences of police corruption erode confidence in them (Olutola, 2014; Akinlabi, 2017; Faull, 2007). When police officers demand or accept bribes or kick-backs from citizens who violated the law in order to evade arrest, it diminishes the respect that citizens should ordinarily accord the police. It has thus been argued that the public's experiences and knowledge of police corruption are prominent factors that engender lack of confidence in the police (Tankebe, 2009).

The current study intended to corroborate (or refute) the literature on public perceptions of the police by exploring similar drivers of negative perceptions among the students of a selected university in South Africa. A particular interest was to establish whether university students in the transitional South African society harboured a sense of confidence in the police and to determine which factors, if any, shaped their confidence.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participant selection for data collection

The data were collected by means of a cross-sectional survey of 682 student participants from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa. The sample was drawn from three campuses that were randomly selected from the six campuses of the university. Convenience sampling at the selected campuses was utilised.

In order to recruit participants for this study, permission was obtained from the university's Ethical Committee and from lecturers teaching specific modules in various lecture theatres. After approval had been granted, the researcher and his assistants arrived at the lecture venues to administer the survey questionnaire. After the researcher and his team had introduced themselves and conveyed the purpose of the study, consent forms indicating voluntary participation, anonymity

and confidentiality were explained and distributed. A total of 750 questionnaires were issued but 682 students participated voluntarily and completed and returned the questionnaires.

3.2. Measurements for data analysis

Excluding the demographic items, the survey posed a total of 30 questions. With the exception one variable, all the key scales described below were measured on a 5-point (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) Likert scale. An explanation of the variables and the mean values and standard deviations is presented below.

3.2.1. Dependent variables

This study had three dependent variables. These variables measured different aspects of the respondents' perceptions of the police, namely trust in the police, police effectiveness, and police procedural fairness.

Trustworthiness

The respondents' trust in the police was measured on an addictive scale of five items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Ascending scores indicated an increasingly positive perception of police trustworthiness. The results were: a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.74$; mean = 13.77; and SD = 3.62.

Police effectiveness

The police effectiveness variable assessed the respondents' perceptions of the extent to which the police are able to achieve their constitutional responsibilities. It was measured using a five-item scale adopted from Tyler (2006) and recorded according to a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Ascending scores indicated an increasingly positive perception of police effectiveness. The results were: a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.78$; mean = 13.17; and SD = 3.98.

Procedural fairness

University students' perception of the procedural fairness of the police was assessed using a seven-item scale adapted from Tyler (2006), Tankebe (2009) and Murphy et al. (2010). It was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Ascending scores indicated an increasingly positive perception of police procedural fairness. The results were: a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.84$; mean = 19.34; and SD = 4.97.

3.2.2 Independent variables

The effects of the dependent variables referred to above were tested on the independent variables, namely experiences of police corruption (personal and vicarious), fear of crime, and demographic features.

Police corruption (personal experiences)

Personal experiences of police corruption were measured using a three-item scale. The items were premised on the assumption that students' personal experiences of police corruption shaped their confidence in the police. The instrument was adapted from Tankebe (2010) and Sunshine and Tyler (2003). The responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = almost always). The results were: a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.88$; mean = 6.92; and SD = 3.28.

Police corruption (vicarious experiences)

The participants' vicarious knowledge of police corruption were measured using a three-item scale to determine if this knowledge impacted their confidence in the police. The instrument was adapted from Boateng (2016), Tankebe (2010) and Sunshine and Tyler (2003). Responses were recorded according to a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = almost always). The results were: a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.88$; mean = 7.01; and SD = 3.36.

Fear of crime

Students' fear of crime in their neighbourhood was measured using a five-item scale. The items measured whether the students' perception of safety and security in their neighbourhoods shaped their confidence in the police. The instrument was adapted from Boateng (2016) and the responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The results were: a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.79$; mean = 12.79; and SD = 4.33

4. RESULTS

4.1. University students' perceptions of and confidence in the police

The main aim of this study was to determine the extent to which university students' perceptions of the police shaped their confidence in the police institution. To achieve this goal, descriptive statistics were conducted and the findings are presented in Table 1. Various conclusions were drawn from the observed patterns. First, students had low trust in members of the SAPS. It was revealed that 36% was not proud of the police while 41% perceived that the police did not always act within the law.

Table 1: Percentage distributions of students' perceptions and trust in the police (N=682)

Variables and Items	Ratings* (%)				
Trustworthiness	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
(1) The police are trustworthy	8.4	24.0	50.4	15.4	1.8
(2) I am proud of the police	12.3	23.5	43.6	16.1	4.5
(3) I have confidence in the police	14.6	23.9	44.3	17.3	2.6
(4) The police are usually honest	8.1	29.3	49.6	10.9	2.2
(5) The police always act within the law	9.7	31.4	39.7	16.6	2.6
Effectiveness	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
(6) The police respond promptly to calls about crimes (e.g. robbery, assault)	27.0	22.1	30.9	16.0	4.0
(7) The police are always ready to provide satisfactory assistance to victims of crime	10.9	25.2	44.0	17.7	2.2
(8) The police are doing well in controlling violent crime (e.g. armed robbery)	16.0	28.7	36.6	17.3	4.4
(9) Overall the police are doing a good job in my neighbourhood	19.2	35.0	28.0	11.1	6.6
(10) When the police stop people they usually handle the situation well	13.2	24.3	41.5	15.7	5.3
Procedural justice	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
(11) The police always act within the law	15.2	38.9	32.3	11.0	2.6
(12) The police treat everyone with respect and dignity	16.7	39.9	33.1	7.5	2.7
(13) The police treat everyone equally	10.9	24.8	43.4	17.7	3.2
(14) The police respect people's rights	7.3	20.5	45.7	24.6	1.8
(15) The police often take decisions that are fair to people	3.5	16.6	36.5	38.7	4.7
(16) The police take account of the needs and concerns of the people they deal with	11.0	27.3	34.6	22.9	4.3
(17) The police sincerely try to help people with their problems	9.4	34.0	36.5	15.1	5.0

*1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

Secondly, the students' view about the effectiveness of the police was moderately low but slightly lower than their perception of police trustworthiness. More specifically, 49% of the students indicated that the police did not respond promptly to calls about crimes (e.g., robbery and assault). In terms of performance, 54% was of the view that the police were not doing a good job in their neighbourhoods.

Thirdly, the students' perception of the procedural fairness of the police was moderately low, and also lower than their views about police trustworthiness and effectiveness. It was revealed that 54% viewed the police as not procedurally fair in their dealings with people and they held the view that the police did not treat everyone with respect and dignity. Moreover, 57% of the respondents held the view that the police did not always act according to the law.

4.2. Determinants of university students' confidence in the police

To determine the predictors of university students' perception of the police, a lead square regression analysis was conducted and three models were generated. The first model was targeted at determining which of the independent variables exerted a significant effect on the students' level of trust in the police. The model revealed that, apart from the demographic variables (age, sex and race), fear of crime and vicarious knowledge of police corruption were predictors of declining trust in the police. Parallel to most findings in the literature where citizens' fear of crime and limited trust in police trustworthiness were inversely skewed, this study showed similar skewedness. A unit increase in students' fear of crime in their

neighbourhood resulted in a .65 decrease in their trust in the police. In the same vein, a unit increase in the students' vicarious knowledge of corruption resulted in a .64 decrease in their trust in the police. In addition, female students' experiences

of the police exerted significant effect on their trust in the police. While a unit increase in the female students' experiences resulted in a .72 decrease in their trust in the police, there was a .52 decrease in African (Black) students' trust in the police. The explanatory power of the independent variables in the trust in the police model was R^2 of .19.

The procedural justice model showed that demographic variables, vicarious knowledge and fear of crime exerted significant effects on the students' negative assessment of the procedural fairness of the police. For instance, a unit increase in African (Black) students' experiences of the police resulted in a .74 decrease in their assessment of the procedural fairness of the police. The students' vicarious knowledge was also inversely skewed. A unit increase in the students' vicarious

knowledge of corruption resulted in a .68 decrease in their assessment of the procedural fairness of the police. Conversely, fear of crime was positively skewed. Unlike most findings on public perception of the police where there is often an inverse skewedness between fear of crime and confidence in the procedural fairness of the police, these findings indicated positive skewedness. A unit increase in the students' experiences of fear of crime resulted in a .53 increase in perceptions of the procedural fairness of the police. The explanatory power of the independent variables in the procedural justice model is indicated by R^2 of .21.

The third model pertaining to students' personal experiences of police corruption showed significant effect on the effectiveness of the police. This finding is parallel to most findings in criminological literature on public perceptions of the police. However, vicarious experience/knowledge did not exert any significant effect.

Demographic variables (age and sex) also had a negative impact on the perceptions of the effectiveness of the police. Conversely, fear of crime exerted a positive result on the students' assessment of police effectiveness. A unit increase in students' experiences of fear of crime resulted in a .61 increase in their confidence in police effectiveness. All the variables in this model explained 41% of the variations in police effectiveness.

Table 2: Regression analysis of factors influencing students' confidence in the police

	Trust in the police		Procedural fairness		Effectiveness	
	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β
Age	0.50	0.67	0.69	-0.64	0.46	-1.02
Sex (Female)	0.15	-0.72	0.36	-1.41	0.24	-0.69
Race (African)	0.18	-0.52	0.26	-0.74**	0.17	-0.77**
Personal experience	0.14	0.02	0.16	-0.01	0.21	-0.70**
Vicarious experience	0.17	-0.64**	0.25	-0.68**	0.04	0.09
Fear of crime	0.21	-0.65**	0.05	0.53	0.03	0.61**
F		27.06		29.41	77.54	
R^2		0.19		0.21	0.41	

Note: Entries are standardised coefficients (β) and standard errors (S.E.).

* P <0.05, ** P <0.01, *** P <0.001

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore to what extent university students' perceptions of the police shaped their confidence in the police institution. More specifically, the study considered the correlate of trustworthiness, effectiveness and procedural justice (as proxy measures of public confidence in the police). The data were delimited to students at three campuses of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Based on the findings, it is argued that the study validates and also extends earlier findings on the factors that influence university students' perceptions of the police. In summary, university students do have an unfavourable disposition towards the police, and this ultimately shapes their negative perceptions of the SAPS.

Fundamentally, the students' personal and vicarious experiences of corruption had significant impacts on their perception of the police. There are plausible explanations for this. In addition to media reports and research in the field of policing in South Africa that have persistently exposed the issue of police corruption, corruption itself has become institutionalised in South Africa (Olutola, 2012). In fact, students themselves could have tried to bribe the police to defeat the ends of justice. This finding is thus consistent with previous studies on public perception of the police that argue that public attitudes towards the police are significantly shaped negatively by the perception of police corruption (Akinlabi, 2017; Boateng, 2016; Tankebe, 2010).

Furthermore, fear of crime in their neighbourhoods exerted significant impact on the students' assessment of the police. Their negative perception could have accrued from the general high crime status of South Africa. Crime rates in South Africa are a reflection of the level of insecurity in the country (Burger, 2011), while the police are expected to be effective in combating and preventing crime. Unfortunately, overreliance on the SAPS to achieve the unrealistic goal of a crime-free South Africa could be a result of what Olutola describes as a *hopeless hope* (Olutola, 2014:1; Faull, 2007). However, crime in general is a symptom of the broader socio-economic challenges that bedevil the country, such as poverty, unemployment and poor living conditions. Although measures are put in place by the government to address these challenges, crime rates in South Africa are still escalating. It is therefore not surprising that students have an unfavourable disposition towards the police.

Another plausible reason for the low confidence in the police among university students is the friction that characterised student-police relations during the 'fees must fall' protest actions. Other demonstrations by students also pitted them

against the police in recent times. In the process of dispersing student-protesters, the police sometimes fired rubber bullets and teargas at students, even when the protests were apparently peaceful (Lange, 2017). Such unprofessional conduct often aggravated the situation and resulted in situations where ordinary students' demonstrations turned into a fiasco.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study set out to determine the extent to which university students' perception of the police shaped their confidence in the police institution. The assessment was based on the normative proposition that positive encounters with the police will engender confidence, but that negative experiences will reduce confidence in the police. While the findings of this study are imperative and have implications for policing in South Africa, the study was not immune to limitations. First, it was difficult to make causal conclusions as the study utilised a cross-sectional survey in the collection of data. It is acknowledged that a longitudinal survey using the same variables will possibly provide a more effective foundation for drawing such (causal) conclusions.

Another limitation was the limited sample size as the data were not fully representative of the student population of universities in the nine provinces of South Africa. Therefore, future studies should conduct similar large-scale representative surveys. Moreover, research is required in areas not covered by the study, particularly to determine creative strategies that can pilot effective police performance in the country.

The current research findings lend credence to related studies' hypothesised argument that the effects of police corruption, brutality and other ancillary acts and misconduct perpetrated by the police impact students' confidence in them negatively. If the police act in alignment with the ethos of their profession and conduct their statutory responsibilities in a manner that promotes healthy police-public relationships, university students will undoubtedly have restored confidence in them.

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