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LEARNING THE PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE AS HELD BY GENERATION Z

ABSTRACT

This current research provides an introductory exploration of the perceptions of police as held by members of Generation Z. Within, we briefly review perception development, some unique features of Generation Z, and study how Generation Z's features and perceptions may influence police practices and dialogue within communities. We discovered the population surveyed has a largely positive view of police; which holds significant importance to the authority and legitimacy of police services. However, we also find relationships between police and Generation Z minority populations has room for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

This research is simply an introductory exploration into the perceptions of police as held by members of Generation Z. The goal of this research is not meant to be a far-reaching explanation; instead it is meant to start the conversation and further inquiry into Generation Z's views of police. In starting this project, we find a considerable amount of information concerning perceptions, development of perceptions, and generational studies already exists. We didn't need to expand on this, or go into great detail on the history of perceptions or generations, because it is readily available and didn't add to the purpose of this research. On the other hand, we did find information concerning Generation Z's perception about police are just beginning to emerge, and this does need to be expanded upon. Hence, this is the purpose of our research. It is meant to humbly expand our understanding of how

Generation Z views police and the consequences potentially associated with those views, or in other words, those perceptions.

In the following pages we will briefly highlight how perceptions are developed through life for primary background knowledge, introduce the importance of perceptions on police performance and how that informs interaction with citizens, consider features uniquely associated with Generation Z, and finally look at how Generation Z's perceptions of police guide their interactions with police.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brief Assessment of Perception Development for a Foundational Understanding

Perceptions are important to understand, because they inform us about the world we live in and how we interact with our surroundings and environment.

Perceptual development begins from the first moments of living and continue through life. Perceptions evolve and grow from our senses and experiences as humans. The connections of perceptions in our life are associated with successes, concerns, fears, worry, knowledge and relationships. Further, the way we perceive the world is developed through childhood and shapes how we perceive our environment and

lives as an adult (Perceptual Development, 2019).

Even though perceptions develop early on and throughout life, research suggests our perceptions tend to develop in stages and are not necessarily always fixed. The stages of perception development from childhood through adulthood can be defined in 16 distinct stages illustrated in Table 1 as adapted from Cloosterman (n.d.).

Table 1

Stage 1 – Functional aspects	This first stage is nothing more than inborn reflexes to stimulus from within; such as hunger.
Stage 2 – Impulse followed by sensation	The next stage is the development of the circular reflex which is defined by responses that lead to pleasure to external stimulus. However, we don't understand the causal connection at this stage.
Stage 3 – Permanence and coordination	In this stage, we start to understand relationship between what is heard and what is seen.
Stage 4 – Recognize patterns	Here there is no permanent understanding of sensations at this point, we still start to recognize patterns within normal contexts, but not outside of normal contexts.
Stage 5 – Perceive out of normal context	In stage 5 we start to recognize and follow moving objects and are able to see variances in their shapes.
Stage 6 – Something can be undone	Stage 6 we begin to learn that an action or something can be undone by a follow-up action or response.
Stage 7 – Cause and effect	We are now developing the notion of cause and effect. We learn that things are happening between internal and external interactions.
Stage 8 – Coordinate visual with tactile and movement	At this time the notions of space and time are being built up as we handle and move objects.
Stage 9 – Notion of permanent places and objects	Here, we learn we can always return to a place in many different ways. There is an idea or understanding of permanent places and objects.
Stage 10 – Start of memory	Now, we are learning to call up images from the past, not just recognize something as familiar.
Stage 11 – Form an image of absent objects	This period of perception development is crucial. Here we're learning to form images of an absent object.
Stage 12 – Form image with perceived and unperceived things	Now we're building images of the world from experiences and stories.
Stage 13 – Distinction between self and world	Stage 13 has us creating a mental map of where we fit into the world.
Stage 14 – Mental map as reality	The mental map created in stage 13 is now becoming our reality. We can react to new experiences without thinking about them much.
Stage 15 – Translate perception into language	This stage has us transforming the perceptions of our world into thought and language.
Stage 16 – Need for logical thought	Finally, we feel a need to learn from logical thought. We try to put structure to the world and communicate that structure to others.

These 16 stages seem to neatly explain the formation of our perceptions; however, it is known that perceptions are always in a state of flux. Meaning, what we perceive and learn is always based on our ability to observe certain relationships between things or actions. This creates a kind of cause and effect relationship followed by a corresponding mental image; which builds a functional mental map. Soon, these mental maps can take on structures and inform our reality, and this can be hard to change (Cloosterman, n.d.).

Citizens' perceptions of the police have long been recognized as an issue of utmost importance. Positive perceptions of the police are not only important for healthy police/community relationships, but also for boosting community safety. Given the importance of positive police perceptions, it's no wonder why this topic is becoming an important topic of inquiry. Though much has been learned about perceptions of police in general; there's a shortage of information specifically related to Generation Z's perception of police (Henry & Franklin, 2019).

Social scientists have found that citizens' perceptions of police officers have a direct correlation with their perceptions of police legitimacy. Meaning, legitimacy implies public acceptance of the police role in enforcing society's laws. When the public perceives that the police have acted properly, fairly, and in their best interest; then policing is viewed with greater legitimacy. Perceptions of legitimacy are critical to a positive working relationship between police and the public (Owen, Burke, Few-Demo, & Natwick, 2018). This is why we argue it's important to understand the perceptions of police for each generation and begin to look at Generation Z's perception of police.

Some Unique Features of Generation Z

Traditionally, societies define generations through historical events and related

phenomena that creates a distinct generational gap between populations. The identification of a generation requires a form of social 'proximity' to some set of shared events, experiences, or cultural event. Currently, America recognizes four distinct generations of adults. They are: The Greatest Generation born between 1922 and 1945, the baby boomers born from 1946 to 1964, Generation X born from 1965 to 1977, and Millennials born from about 1977 to 1993. The newest emerging generation is Generation Z born from 1993 to 2005; the oldest of whom are now reaching young adulthood, and the majority of whom are between age 20 and younger (Turner, 2015). So far, Generation Z has already experienced Ferguson Missouri, the Black Lives Matter movement, public protests against law enforcement, and politicians calling the integrity of law enforcement officials into question (Bever, 2014; Tribune Wire Reports, 2014).

Long before the term *influencer* was coined, young people played that social role by creating trends and perceptions (Francis & Hoefel, 2019, para.1). Now a new generation of perception creators have come on the scene; Generation Z (Gen Z). Members of Gen Z, typically identified as people born from 1995 to 2010 have been exposed to the internet, social networks, and mobile systems since birth. They were born into technology; which has produced a hypercognitive generation very comfortable with collecting and cross-referencing information to form perceptions and experiences (Francis & Hoefel, 2019; Turner, 2015).

Gen Z'ers believe in the importance of dialogue and accept differences of opinion with the institutions in which they participate and with their own families. They can interact with institutions that reject their personal values without abandoning those values. The fact that Gen Z'ers feel comfortable interacting with traditional religious institutions without abandoning personal beliefs that might not

be broadly accepted by these institutions also demonstrates their pragmatism. Rather than spurn an institution altogether, Gen Z'ers would rather engage with it to extract whatever makes sense for them (Francis & Hoefel, 2019; Turner, 2015).

Members of this generation tend to believe that change must come from dialogue. More than any previous generation, Gen Z'ers feel they need to break with traditional systems to effect change (Francis & Hoefel, 2019). These behaviors of Gen Z'ers view consumption and brand relationship through expression and of perception; which includes interactions with public servants such as police departments and their officers (Henry & Franklin, 2019). Coupled with technology, this generational shift is transforming the way we interact with police and the services they provide. This transformation cuts across socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds. This may mean that police need to rethink how they deliver services to citizens (Francis & Hoefel, 2019; Henry & Franklin, 2019).

Generation Z includes the current youth of American society. This generation has never experienced life before the Internet; plus technology in the forms of smartphones, tablets, social networks, and internet connectivity have always been in the lives of Generation Z (Francis & Hoefel, 2019). Generation Z youth are uniquely diverse, with biracial and multiracial children, a growing LGBTQ community, and less fixed sexual identity (Turner, 2015). Also, more Generation Z youth are being raised in urban areas, exposing them to more cultural perspectives when compared to previous generations. Thus, Generation Z youth are becoming more aware of the challenges facing them; which includes police services (Turner, 2015).

The Traditional Policing Model and Generation Z's Engagement with Police

Phenomena unique to traditional police work are some of the matters that directly

influence perceptions about police. These distinguishing phenomena are: authority to use force, coercion, persuasion, and to arrest. In regards to these distinguishing aspects, scholars find police department culture, collective values, principles and accepted mission within police organizations determine how officers use authority. Socially acceptable uses, as well as, socially unacceptable abuses, generate positive or negative perceptions (Cockcroft, 2013).

This perception commencement is important to understand because public support, or lack of, impacts police legitimacy in the eyes of the public they serve. If police legitimacy fades, disrespectful attitudes between the police and public may ensue; then perceptions of fairness and justice can disappear (Charoensap, Virakul, Senasu, & Ayman, 2018). Notwithstanding the official authority police hold, that authority becomes relatively ineffective when citizen support erodes (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Specifically, Bradford and Quinton (2014) discovered public support, cooperation, and police legitimacy hinges directly on law enforcement's dedication to a democratic policing style. Meaning, having the support of the people police serve allows them to negotiate and persuade instead of using force (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Kolm, 2008; Wrangle, 2007). At last, perceived fairness and justice from the police need to be protected, because hostility and challenges to their proper authority might follow (Charoensap, Virakul, Senasu, & Ayman, 2018), which would not serve the public's interest for good police services (Niederhoffer, 1967).

Through recent history, police behavior is becoming more publicized and critiqued as police/citizen interactions are being shared on traditional and social media (Wheelock, Strohshine, & O'hear, 2019). Police have expressed reservations about interacting with or through media because they believe

media is used to distort the duties, actions, or motives of policing (Crank, 2014). Many of these incidents have begun to influence the perceptions of citizens about police; especially the perceptions of Generation Z. It's being discovered that social outrage over police misconduct is growing, and the perception is that police may be insensitive to the concerns of citizens and priorities of contemporary American criminal justice (Wheelock, Stroschine, & O'hear, 2019). This is reported to lead police toward protection of their profession and knowledge; which can sometimes be viewed as cynicism or contempt to the public (Fielding, 1988; Manning, 1977).

However, in spite of this, research finds that police still benefit from a mostly positive and supportive attitude overall. This generally positive attitude toward police is sometimes explained by the characteristics of the neighborhood, variations in demographics, individual experiences, perceived public safety, and mostly perceptions (Wheelock, Stroschine, & O'hear, 2019).

METHODS & RESULTS

This study used an exploratory design consisting of a quasi-experimental cross-sectional survey to collect data depicting the perceptions of police as held by members of Generation Z. During Spring of 2019, we offered a quantitative survey with a Likert scale to students enrolled in a law enforcement program at a large Midwestern university to collect information on their background, demographics, socio-economic status and perceptions of police. We delivered 160 surveys and 158 were returned; with the data being analyzed with SPSS, aggregated, scaled, counterbalanced, and tabulated into nominal and ordinal levels of measurement. Absent a sophisticated

level of explanation, we attribute the high response rate to surveys being distributed and collected during a normal class period for the participants. Part of the statistical analysis was to determine all data being used was provided by a member of Generation Z according to their demographic responses.

In analyzing our results, we start with descriptive statistics of the sample population and report percentages related to participant demographics. After this, we move into a bivariate and multivariate analysis using Chi-Square and Regression to measure associations and significance. We found these forms of analysis provide a robust understanding of Generation Z's perception of police. The results are shown in written and table form on the pages following.

Descriptive Statistics

The study sample of this research was born on or between 1995 and after which we deemed as Generation Z samples. Majority of the study samples were male (67.7%), having a law enforcement major (94.3%) and reported their interest in working in Law Enforcement (88%) in the future. Similarly, most of the respondents were never married (95.5%) and having less than \$10,000 personal annual income (76.5%). The distribution of racial category was 10.7% Black, 24% Hispanic, 59.5% White and 5.8% of them from other racial groups. Approximate to a normal distribution was political party preference among the respondents: 30.4% Democrat/lean democrat, 27.8% Republican/lean republican, 13.3% Independent and 28.5% of them reported no political party preference or affiliation. More than half of the study samples live in Suburban areas (56.3%).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Generation Z sample (N=158)

Variable	Attribute	Frequency	Valid %
Gender	Male	107	67.7
	Female	51	32.3
Born on or Between 1995-2015	Yes	152	96.2
Military Experience	Yes	18	11.4
LEJA Major	Yes	149	94.3
Wants to work in Law Enforcement	Yes	139	88
Age	18-20	49	31
	21-23	101	63.9
	24-26	8	5.1
Race	Black	17	10.7
	Hispanic	38	24
	White	94	59.5
	Other	9	5.8
Marital Status	Never Married	151	95.5
	Married	2	1.2
	Other	5	3.3
Academic Year	Freshman	15	9.5
	Sophomore	15	9.5
	Junior	77	48.7
	Senior	51	32.3
Annual Income ¹	<\$10,000	120	76.5
	\$10,000-\$20,000	22	14
	\$20,000-\$30,000	12	7.6
	>\$30,000	3	1.9
Political Preference	Democrat	48	30.4
	Republican	44	27.8
	Independent	21	13.3
	None	45	28.5
Permanent Residence	Rural	49	31
	Suburban	89	56.3
	Urban	20	12.7

1 N=157.

Bivariate and Multivariate Results

The survey instrument that we conducted for the research had a four-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) for the perception measures of Generation Z. The Chi-square test was used to see the statistical associations between the Generation Z perceptions and control variables. Due to the small sample size, some of the statistical test assumptions (chi-square) were not met, so they were removed from the statistical test analysis.

According to the results, while 72.3% of the males had a favorable impression of the

police, females had 27.7% (p<.01. See the Chi-square values and degrees of freedoms in the table below). On the other hand, 75.5% of the males reported that they disagree that the police abuse their authority compared to 24.5% of female respondents (p<.01). Those who were agreeing that “police tactics are too harsh” was Blacks 38.9%, Hispanics 27.8% and Whites 33.3% (p<.001) respectively. The association between race and police competency was that 7% of Blacks, 25.8% of Hispanics and 67.2% of the Whites agreed on the competency of the police. The time spent in the university education has a significant impact on the respondents’ approach

to the perception of the police honesty. Accordingly, while 7.7% of Freshman and 5.1% of Sophomore agree on the honesty of the police, these percentages are reaching out to 53.8% among Juniors and 33.3% among Seniors ($p < .01$).

Generation Z's perceptions of the police clearly differentiates according to their political party preferences. Study samples reported that 16.7% of Democrats/lean democrat, 41.7%

of Republicans/lean republican and 11.1% of Independents agreed that police equally treat public ($p < .001$). Within the "agree" category, 30.6% of the responded did not report any support towards a political party affiliation/preference. Majority of the respondents who reported that they would like to work in the field of Law Enforcement believe that police racially profile Americans (80%; $p < .01$).

Table 3. Associations (Chi-Square Test Results) of Generation Z Perceptions with Control Variable (N=158)

	Gender	Race	Academic Year	Political Preference	Permanent Residence	Wants to Work in Law Enforcement
I Have A Favorable Impression of The Police	9.57 (1)**	-	-	-	-	18.80 (1)***
I Have Confidence in The Police	4.93 (1)*	-	-	-	-	20.75(1)***
Police Tactics Are Too Harsh	X	16.46 (2)***	-	-	X	-
Police Are Impartial	X	X	-	9.49 (3)*	X	X
Police Are Competent	X	17.70 (2)***	-	-	X	5.61 (1)*
Police Racially Profile Americans	X	-	-	14.75 (3)**	X	7.40 (1)**
Police Treat Everyone Equally	7.75 (1)**	-	X	17.32 (3)***	X	-
Police Are Not Held Accountable for Misconduct	X	-	-	-	X	6.60 (1)**
Police Are Honest	X	-	12.44 (3)**	-	9.04 (2)*	-
Police Only Use Proper and Legal Amounts of Force	X	-	X	13.98 (3)**	X	X
Police Are Too Strict in Enforcing Laws	X	8.71(2)*	-	-	-	X
Police Used to Be More Firm When Enforcing Laws	X	X	-	8.04 (3)*	X	X
Police Abuse Their Authority	8.33 (1)**	-	X	X	6.92 (2)*	X
Police Think They Are Above the Law	4.91 (1)*	-	8.74 (3)*	8.61 (3)*	9.05 (2)*	4.41 (1)*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

(X) association is not statistically significant.

(-) Chi-square test assumptions are not met due to small sample size in the contingency tables.

After conducting bivariate tests, we further tested the predictive value of the independent variables on some of the survey questions that were previously discussed in the literature. One of the most important concepts of Generation Z was their perceptions of the police. To this end, "favorable impression of the police" was taken as a dependent variable, then binary logistic regression test was conducted to see any significant predictors. Among all variables, only race was seen to be a statistically significant predictor of favorable impression on the police (Modal's chi-square=22.77; $df=2$; $p < .001$). Race

was able to explain 29% of the variation in favoring the police. According to the variables in the equation, Blacks had .033 and Hispanics had .280 lesser odds compared to Whites. All other variables such as gender, academic year, political preference and permanent residency places were not included in the regression model. Similarly, when "Confidence in the police" was taken into consideration, race again was the only statistically significant predictor (Model's chi-square=30.19; $df=2$; $p < .001$). Almost half of the variance in the confidence in police (41%-Negalkarke's R square was used) was seen

to be explained by the model. Compared to Whites, Blacks had .026 lesser odds whereas Hispanics had 1.23 higher odds of predicting confidence in the police.

These results clearly indicated that *race* is the focal point of perceptions against the police. Thus, using the same statistical technique, we put racial profiling as the dependent variable and run the regression test again. Interestingly, academic year of the respondents was the significant predictor

of racial profiling perception of the police (Model's Chi-square=12.19; df=3; p<.01). As it can be seen from the table below; the degree of believing that the police are racially profiling Americans decreases after the first two years of university education. Accordingly, Freshmen are 5 times more likely to believe that the police are profiling Americans compared to Seniors. The level of negative perception decreases to 1.42 times when they become Seniors.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results of Academic Year Predictive Values for Police Profiling (N=158)

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	
Model*	Academic Year		10.933	3	.012		
	Freshman	1.609	.662	5.911	1	.015	5.000
	Sophomore	1.705	.655	6.772	1	.009	5.500
	Junior	.352	.376	.875	1	.349	1.422
	Constant	-.693	.297	5.445	1	.020	.500

*p<.01.

Reference category for Academic Year is "Senior".

DISCUSSION

To begin, we are among the first to perceive the limitations of sample, size, and generalizability with the current research, but we also realize this research isn't absent of value. Even though our research is a small opening measure; it still serves as a significant marker in knowing how Generation Z's perception of police stand in relation to confidence, favorability, and performance. Through this research we have learned that education, race, and sex has a relationship with Generation Z's perceptions of the police. Meaning, the members of Generation Z, that were sampled for this survey, expressed more confidence in and favorable perceptions of police if they were male, non-minority, and were further along in their college education. Because of this finding, we determine this study has value and warrants further investigation. The value is learning how police can effectively interact with Generation Z to

foster healthy relationships and interactions with all members of Generation Z, not just educated white males.

This is important to learn because in order to maintain peace and goodwill with citizens, it's imperative for public perception of police remain positive. This is especially true for Generation Z since their perceptions of the police are really beginning to form. The public expects police to fulfill their roles and perform their duties within socially defined expectations, and this means knowing what the generational perceptions of police are. Knowing perceptions and acting within lawful expectations builds trust, fairness, justice; and promotes strong community relationships. The relationship police have with communities should not come from fear, but rather from cooperation, professionalism, and knowledge of generational variations. In the end, police authority emanates from perceptions people hold about police (Owen, Burke, Few-Demo, & Natwick, 2018).

While learning from the new knowledge garnered in this study, we suggest future steps in regards to this research. Activities such as, collecting data from larger and broader groups of Generation Z members to include qualitative and quantitative information in both cross-sectional, longitudinal, or time series studies can acquire boundless information. It's our concluding hope that future research will reveal what police practices create the best perceptions and relationships with all members of Generation Z, because it's important for all citizens to perceive police authority as favorable, legitimate, and practiced fairly. People deserve good police service.

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