

Race and Perceptions of Police Misconduct

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This article examines perceptions of police misconduct in the United States and the factors that influence these perceptions. Using data from a large, nationally representative survey of whites, African Americans, and Hispanics, we examine how citizens' views of four types of police misconduct—verbal abuse, excessive force, unwarranted stops, and corruption—are shaped by race and other factors, including personal and vicarious experiences with police officers, exposure to mass media coverage of police behavior, and neighborhood conditions. Results show that race remains a key factor in structuring attitudes toward police misconduct even after controlling for these other variables. Race is a strong predictor in large part because blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to report having negative interactions with police, to be exposed to media reports of police misconduct, and to live in high-crime neighborhoods where policing may be contentious—each of which increases perceptions of police misconduct. The findings are consistent with the group-position model of race relations.

Relations between the police and minority groups are a continuing problem in the United States and other multiracial societies. Surveys consistently document racial differences in perceptions of the police, with minorities more likely than whites to harbor negative views. While racial differences have been amply documented, less is known about the sources of these differences. This article explores this question through an examination of citizens' perceptions and reported experiences regarding several types of police misconduct.

Theoretical Background

The Group-Position Thesis

Blacks and whites often perceive American social institutions in starkly different terms, and views of criminal justice are no exception. Indeed, race is one of the most salient predictors of attitudes toward the police and other criminal justice institutions: blacks are more likely than whites to express dissatisfaction with various aspects of policing. Much less is known about Hispanics' views of the police, however, and existing studies are limited either by focusing on Hispanics alone (Carter 1985), by comparing them only to whites (Holmes 1998), or by lumping blacks and Hispanics together as "nonwhite" or "minority." Few studies systematically compare blacks, whites, and Hispanics, and this literature is insufficient to determine whether Hispanic perceptions of the police take the form of a "minority-group" perspective similar to that of blacks, whether their views more closely align with those of whites, or whether they take an intermediate position in a white-Hispanic-African American "racial-hierarchy" model.

We also do not fully understand *why* racial differences exist in citizens' relations with the

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police. What accounts for these racial differences? Our analysis is informed by the *group-position model* of race relations, which is a variant of conflict theory. Group-position theory views racial animus not merely as a consequence of negative feelings between members of different racial groups but, more centrally, as a reflection of group competition and conflict over material rewards, power, and status in a multiracial society (Blumer 1958). In this model, prejudice is rooted in a collective “sense of group position,” and *group interest* is the driving force underlying contentious intergroup relations. Dominant group interests are predicated on members’ beliefs that they have proprietary claims to scarce resources, any challenge to which is viewed as a threat to the racial status quo and may be resisted. Dominant group attitudes toward other racial groups are therefore positional: shaped by a sense of supremacy over minority groups and a need to defend the group against threats to its interests. The subordinate group, on the other hand, is motivated by a sense of unfair and exclusionary treatment by the dominant group, and by an interest in securing a greater share of advantages vis-à-vis the dominant group. Racial attitudes thus reflect not merely individual-level prejudice in the traditional sense, but also (1) whites’ fears that they risk losing resources or privileges to competing racial groups and (2) minority members’ beliefs that their group interests will be enhanced by challenging the existing racial order.

The group-position thesis has been used to explain intergroup racial attitudes (Blumer 1958; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Quillian 1995); we extend it to an analysis of group relations with social institutions. If the dominant group believes that it is entitled to valuable resources, it follows that the group will have an affinity with the institutions that serve their interests. Policing is one such institution.¹

Whites tend to hold a favorable opinion of the police, favor aggressive law enforcement, and are skeptical of criticisms of the police. There is a racial dimension to this orientation. Many whites view blacks as inclined to criminal or violent behavior (Swigert and Farrell 1976; Weitzer 2000; cf. Hurwitz and Peffley 1997). In response to a question in the 2000 General Social Survey, 48 percent of whites think that blacks are “violence-prone.” For many whites, controlling crime is roughly equivalent to intensifying law enforcement against minority individuals or in minority communities. Whites’ identification with the police and perceptions of minorities can be linked to the group-position thesis. When the police are criticized, whites may perceive their group interests as indirectly threatened (Bayley and Mendelsohn 1969:200–4). To accept that minorities are mistreated would lend credence to reforms that might dilute crime control, thereby threatening whites. Whites should thus be dubious or dismissive of allegations of police misconduct.

African Americans and Hispanics, on the other hand, should be more inclined to view the police as a “visible sign of majority domination” (Bayley and Mendelsohn 1969:195), as contributing to their subordination through both legal and extralegal practices, as frequently involved in mistreatment of minority citizens, and as feeling that their group interests would be advanced by greater controls on police. This is not to say that minorities are anti-police, but their subordinate position does increase the chances that they will see police misconduct as both a general problem and one that particularly afflicts Hispanics and blacks.

The group-position approach focuses on perceived (not necessarily real) threats to dominant group interests (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kinder and Sanders 1996:81–90). In fact, most blacks and Hispanics, like many whites, want law enforcement amplified,² though they

1. A related argument is Blalock’s (1967) “minority-threat” thesis, which posits that the amount of resources devoted to formal social control is related to the real or perceived threat posed by minority groups to dominant groups. Cities with large minority populations, for instance, devote greater resources to policing arguably because minorities present a greater perceived threat to whites in such places (Jackson 1989).

2. In the present survey, African Americans and Hispanics overwhelmingly supported an increase, in their city, in the number of officers patrolling the streets in police cars (80 percent for both groups) and on foot patrol (80 and 69 percent, respectively) as well as “more police surveillance of areas where street crimes occur frequently” (88 and 85 percent, respectively). White support for these policies was similarly high.

want it achieved in a fashion that reduces abuses. It is less a question, therefore, of whether racial group interests objectively differ, than a matter of whether their interests are perceived as conflicting. These perceptions are strongly influenced by the claims made by a group's leadership (Blumer 1958). Minority leaders' public castigation of the police may reinforce whites' impressions that minorities are opponents of the police, and that their demands might interfere with the pursuit of law and order. In a nutshell, if whites are skeptical of charges of police misconduct, their view may be partly rooted in their attachment to the law-and-order status quo; perceptions of misconduct among Hispanics and African Americans, by contrast, may reflect their desire to gain better treatment from the police and increase their support for progressive reforms (Weitzer and Tuch 2004).

Although we do not have direct measures of interests and threats, our data do permit testing of one prediction of our extension of group-position theory—i.e., that minority group members will be much more inclined than whites to perceive police misconduct as a serious problem. As noted above, the literature is too sparse to predict whether blacks and Hispanics hold fairly similar or significantly different views of the police and, hence, whether the perceptions of the two groups are organized in a minority-group or racial-hierarchy pattern.

The literature is also deficient in identifying which other factors, in addition to race, are most salient in structuring attitudes toward the police. As one recent literature review concluded, "there is no consensus as to which combinations of variables explain the greatest variance in attitudes toward the police" (Brown and Benedict 2002:564), and another review identifies three variables that have yet to receive the attention they deserve: "the public's personal experiences with the police, what they learn second-hand from friends and acquaintances, and what they learn from the mass media" (Gallagher et al. 2001:v). A deficiency of much of the literature is its underexamination of both micro- and macro-level explanatory factors. Studies typically link citizens' attitudes toward police to individual-level demographic characteristics, such as age, race, and gender (Brown and Benedict 2002). Less research has examined the situational context of citizens' personal contacts with police officers, and even less attention has been devoted to macro-level variables such as neighborhood conditions, city-level characteristics, or the mass media. The present study extends prior work by examining both micro- and macro-level factors in addition to the standard demographic factors. We investigate whether and how citizens' perceptions of the police are affected by their personal and vicarious experiences with officers, exposure to media reporting on police abuses, and neighborhood conditions.

Experiences with the Police

Citizen contacts with police officers have been found to influence general satisfaction with the police. Negative contacts tend to lower opinions of the police and have a stronger effect on attitudes than do positive experiences. Moreover, it appears that "procedural justice"—that is, fair and respectful treatment of citizens by police—has a larger effect on citizens' views of the police than does the outcome of the encounter—e.g., problem resolution, a citation, an arrest (Tyler 1990; Tyler and Huo 2002). People who feel that they have been treated fairly and respectfully are more likely to express favorable opinions of the police and to cooperate with officers. Examples of procedural injustice include the substantive issues addressed in this article—verbal and physical abuse, unwarranted stops—which are likely to be experienced as unfair, disrespectful, and intrusive "procedures" (Weitzer and Tuch 1999, 2002; Wortley, Hagan, and Macmillan 1997).

Contacts with the police tend to have stronger and longer-lasting effects on the views of African Americans than whites (Bordua and Tiftt 1971; Tyler and Huo 2002). Blacks are more likely to leave an encounter with the police upset or angry (Bordua and Tiftt 1971), and they are also more likely to feel that they have not received procedural justice from the officers, which lowers their overall opinion of the police (Tyler and Huo 2002).

However, personal experience is by no means a necessary condition for evaluating the police. Some people who have had no contact with officers view police negatively. For example, more Americans believe that police verbally and physically abuse citizens than the number who report a personal experience with these actions. Furthermore, most Americans seldom interact with police officers (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001), suggesting that their views of the police may be largely rooted in sources other than personal contacts. And positive contacts with officers do not necessarily translate into favorable attitudes (Leiber, Nalla, and Farnsworth 1998; Smith and Hawkins 1973). A good encounter with a police officer may simply be dismissed as exceptional. Finally, experiences themselves may be colored by preexisting opinions of the police, so that individuals who enter an encounter with an unfavorable opinion of police may be predisposed to construe the contact negatively (Brandl et al. 1994). While personal experience appears to influence attitudes for some people, perceptions are also shaped by other forces.

One such factor is an individual's knowledge of other persons' encounters with the police. Such knowledge may be internalized and "vicariously experienced" by an individual and may be communicated to yet other friends, family members, acquaintances, and neighbors—with a possible multiplier effect on larger neighborhood or subcultural beliefs about the police (Harris 2002; Jacob 1971). Little is known about vicarious experience of the police, but there is some evidence of race differences. When asked in one poll whether they knew of anyone who had ever been physically mistreated by the police, 40 percent of blacks but only 17 percent of whites answered affirmatively, and a similar disparity (18 vs. 7 percent) was found for physical abuse of a family member (Gallup 1991:79).

Yet another type of "experience" that may affect one's opinion of the police has to do with observations of police misbehavior. Witnessing an officer mistreat a person may be a profoundly disturbing experience for the observer. Although this has rarely been examined, it appears that witnessing police wrongdoing can significantly lower one's overall opinion of the police (Koenig 1980; Smith and Hawkins 1973; Son et al. 1997).

The present study examines the impact of personal and vicarious experiences with officers on perceptions of police misconduct.

Mass Media Reporting on Misconduct

It is axiomatic that the media affect public perceptions of social problems, although the degree of influence depends in part on a particular audience's receptivity to media messages (Dahlgren 1988; Gerbner et al. 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). It is therefore reasonable to expect public opinion regarding the police to be influenced by media reports on police actions, though this has rarely been studied. Indeed, it is surprising that researchers have given so little attention to media influences on citizens' views of the police, especially in light of the abundant research documenting media influences on citizens' views of crime and fear of crime (Surette 1998). Research indicates that watching police "reality" shows, such as *COPS*, increases white viewers' satisfaction with the police, though this is not true for blacks (Eschholz et al. 2002; cf. Carlson 1985). Such shows typically present the police in a sympathetic light; while officers frequently employ verbal and physical aggression against citizens, it is portrayed as justified (Eschholz et al. 2002; Oliver 1996). On the negative side, some research has found that media coverage of incidents of police misconduct also influence attitudes toward police. These studies document an increase in negative views of the police during or immediately after news coverage of brutality incidents or corruption scandals (Kaminski and Jefferis 1998; Sigelman et al. 1997; Tuch and Weitzer 1997; Weitzer 2002).

If media reports on a single incident of police abuse influence larger views of the police, frequent exposure to media coverage of separate instances of police misconduct might be expected to affect citizens' views of the police especially strongly. While most of this reporting is episodic and fails to address patterns or the prevalence of misconduct (Lawrence 2000:43–6), it is possible

that people who are often exposed to such media reports typically believe that police abuse is rampant. The present study therefore treats the frequency of consumption of media reports on misconduct as a possible predictor of citizens' attitudes toward the police.

Neighborhood Crime and Policing

A small body of literature suggests that neighborhood context shapes police-citizen relations. Neighborhood socioeconomic conditions and racial composition, for instance, have been found to influence residents' attitudes and interactions with the police—with disadvantaged and minority communities having worse relations with the police than middle-class and white communities (Alpert and Dunham 1988; Sampson and Bartusch 1998; Smith, Graham, and Adams 1991; Velez 2001; Weitzer 1999, 2000).

Less is known about whether neighborhood-level police practices and crime conditions structure attitudes toward the police. For instance, residents of neighborhoods where community policing exists might have a higher opinion of the police (CCPEC 2000; Skogan and Hartnett 1997), and may be less inclined to believe that police misconduct is widespread. In theory, community policing involves residents and police officers working together to identify problems and solutions to crime, which should foster improved relations between the two parties and thus reduce the incidence of police abuse of citizens. Whether or not this is so has rarely been studied. We examine whether community policing makes a difference in perceptions of misconduct in one's neighborhood and city.

Do neighborhood crime conditions also influence residents' views of the police? Such conditions include the real or perceived amount or seriousness of crime, residents' fear of crime, and personal victimization. Some research has found that people who believe that their neighborhood is crime-ridden hold negative views of the police (Jesilow, Meyer, and Namazzi 1995; Murty, Roebuck, and Smith 1990; Reisig and Parks 2000). Measures that include both residents' perceptions of crime and objective crime rates also show that neighborhood crime lowers residents' approval of the police (Sampson and Bartusch 1998). Regarding residents' fear of crime, a twelve-city study found that fear of neighborhood crime increased dissatisfaction toward the police who work in the respondents' neighborhood (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999:26), but overall, the literature reports mixed results on the association between fear of crime and opinions of the police (Brown and Benedict 2002).

While the literature is inconclusive, there appears to be a slight preponderance of evidence that neighborhood crime conditions have some influence on residents' satisfaction with the police. There are also reasons to expect that local crime conditions may be associated with real or perceived police misconduct. Neighborhoods with high crime rates tend to have problematic police-community relations. In their efforts to fight crime in these communities, police tend to typify residents as troublemakers (Smith 1986) and act aggressively toward them. The result is that verbal and physical abuse, unjustified stops of people on the street, and corrupt activities are much more likely to occur in high-crime than in low-crime areas (Fagan and Davies 2000; Mastrofski, Reisig, and McCluskey 2002; Mollen Commission 1994; Smith 1986). Therefore, we expect perceptions regarding police misconduct to be influenced by the level of crime and fear of crime in one's neighborhood.³

3. Our framework assumes that experiences with the police, exposure to media reports, and perceptions of neighborhood crime and safety are temporally prior to perceptions of police misconduct, though the direction of causality could be the reverse. Since information that confirms preexisting beliefs is more salient than disconfirming information, it is possible, for instance, that individuals with a preexisting antipathy toward the police might be inclined to seek out media reports that confirm this antipathy. While our cross-sectional data do not allow us to preclude such possibilities, virtually all previous work in this area assumes the same temporal ordering that we use—i.e., that attitudes toward the police are endogenous—rather than the reverse (see Brandl et al. 1994; Brown and Benedict 2002). Still, some caution in interpreting our results is in order.

There are theoretical reasons to expect that two of our variables—neighborhood crime conditions and media exposure—may interact. People who live in high-crime communities and who are frequently exposed to media reports on police abuse may be particularly prone to believe that police misconduct is rife. The literature on media effects on audience perceptions is relevant here. One perspective, the “resonance thesis,” holds that when media images are consistent with objective living conditions, the two factors have a mutual amplifying influence on citizens’ perceptions of the world (Gerbner et al. 1980; Surette 1998:207). The resonance thesis has been supported by several studies of media and fear of crime, which found that fear increased with greater consumption of television programs (both crime dramas and newscasts), but only among those living in high-crime areas (Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz 2000; Doob and MacDonald 1979; Heath and Petraitis 1987). The same resonance pattern may be found for people who are often exposed to media reports of police misconduct and who live in high-crime neighborhoods (where police abuse is more common than in low-crime areas). Media exposure may thus become especially salient when it interacts with neighborhood crime and policing conditions.

Finally, our analysis examines perceived policing practices in both the respondent’s neighborhood and elsewhere in his or her city, which (1) permits a more refined analysis than questions that ask about policing at only the most general, decontextualized level; and (2) allows for comparisons between the two contexts, identifying where, according to respondents, policing is most problematic. Do people perceive police misconduct as largely a neighborhood problem or as a more generic, citywide problem? Compared to white neighborhoods, is police misconduct a serious problem in black and Hispanic neighborhoods, as the conventional wisdom holds? Are blacks and Hispanics more likely to be mistreated outside, rather than inside, their neighborhoods—where officers may regard them as being “out of place,” thus raising police suspicion?

Building on the literature discussed above, the present study tests the following hypotheses with respect to policing in the respondent’s city and neighborhood: *Hypothesis 1*: blacks and Hispanics are significantly more likely than whites to believe that police misconduct occurs frequently, as predicted by the group-position model; *Hypothesis 2*: personal and vicarious experience with police misconduct increases citizens’ beliefs that misconduct occurs frequently; *Hypothesis 3*: exposure to media reports of police misconduct increases the perception that misconduct occurs frequently; *Hypothesis 4*: residents of neighborhoods where crime is high and personal safety is low are more likely to believe that police misconduct occurs frequently; *Hypothesis 5*: residents of areas where community policing is practiced are less likely to perceive police misconduct than residents of other areas; *Hypothesis 6*: media exposure and neighborhood crime interact in such a way that people who are exposed to media reports on police misconduct and who reside in neighborhoods with serious crime problems will be especially likely to believe that police misconduct occurs frequently.

Data and Methods

Data for this study come from a national survey conducted between October and December, 2002 of 1,792 white, Hispanic, and African American residents of metropolitan areas with populations of at least 100,000. The sample is representative of adults living in telephone households in urban and suburban areas that meet this population size criterion.⁴

The data for this article were collected as part of a larger study by the authors of police-citizen relations in the United States. The survey is distinctive in several key respects: (1) it has large subsamples of African Americans and Hispanics, which is rare in previous surveys

4. Only respondents living in cities or adjacent suburban areas were included in the sample because it is in such locales that policing is likely to be especially salient, and perhaps contentious, for residents (Walker and Katz 2002:66–7).

about policing; (2) it includes a number of questions never or rarely asked in prior studies; (3) it focuses on both attitudes toward and reported experiences with the police; and (4) it examines perceptions and experiences in respondents' neighborhoods as well as elsewhere in their city.

Sampling

The survey was conducted for the authors by Knowledge Networks, Inc., a web-based survey research firm that combines probability sampling with the reach and capabilities of the Internet to yield representative samples of respondents without sacrificing data quality. In drawing its sample, Knowledge Networks utilizes list-assisted random digit dialing (RDD) sampling techniques on a sample frame consisting of the entire United States telephone population. Any household with a telephone has the potential to be selected for the Knowledge Networks panel, including computer users and non-users alike. In other words, unlike most other web-based firms, Knowledge Networks recruits its initial sample of households by means of an RDD telephone survey. Telephone numbers are dialed up to 90 days, with at least 15 dial attempts in cases where no one answers the phone, and 25 dial attempts on phone numbers known to be associated with households. Extensive refusal conversion is also performed.

In exchange for free Internet hardware (such as a television set-top box), connectivity (an Internet connection paid for by Knowledge Networks), and on-site installation, participants agree to complete a maximum of 3–4 surveys per month. Selected households remain on the panel for two to three years, at which time they are eligible for retirement. At retirement, households may keep their Internet equipment, but company payments for Internet access are discontinued. As households retire, they are replaced with new recruits, assuring a balanced panel of consistent or growing size. Currently, Knowledge Networks has over 25,000 households in its web-enabled panel.

To trigger a survey, e-mail messages are sent to those panel members who satisfy the screening criteria, if any, for the particular study. Knowledge Networks does not engage in any kind of surreptitious monitoring of respondents' use of the Internet; panel members provide all information voluntarily and with full informed consent. Each participant receives a password-protected e-mail account. Individuals are usually ready to begin taking surveys within two weeks after initial contact. Knowledge Networks maintains a call center to provide technical support and facilitate household cooperation.

Panel Representativeness

The Knowledge Networks panel is representative of and closely mirrors the U.S. population on key demographic, geographic, economic, and social characteristics. Four factors account for the representativeness of the research panel. First, as noted above, the panel is selected using list-assisted random digit dialing telephone methodology, providing a probability-based starting sample of U.S. telephone households.⁵ Second, panel sample weights are adjusted to Census demographic benchmarks to reduce error due to noncoverage of households without telephones and to reduce bias due to nonresponse and other nonsampling errors. Third, samples selected from the panel for individual studies are selected using probability methods, and appropriate sample design weights are calculated for each study. Fourth, non-response and poststratification weighting adjustments are applied to the final survey data to reduce the effects of nonsampling error. The result is that the weighted demographic estimates from the Census and the Knowledge Networks panel differ only modestly across

5. According to the 2000 Census, 98 percent of white households have telephone access, as do 94 percent of African American households and 95 percent of Hispanic households.

categories of gender, age, race-ethnicity, education, and region. Moreover, analyses of panel attrition indicate that no significant differences distinguish those who remain on the panel from those who do not (Dennis and Li 2003). See the Appendix for descriptive statistics for our sample.

When using panels for survey research, potential sampling bias can occur at different stages. First, respondents consent to become panel members; this is referred to as the panel acceptance rate. Knowledge Networks' panel acceptance rate was 40 percent, calculated by standards established by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). Second, the within-survey completion rate—or percentage of panel members who completed our questionnaire among those who received it—was 67 percent. Despite the modest panel acceptance rate, research comparing the quality of data yielded by Knowledge Networks' web-based survey methodology with that of RDD telephone surveys has found that Knowledge Networks yields representative samples that produce parameter estimates very similar to the estimates of RDD samples (Baker et al. 2003; Berrens 2003; Krosnick and Chang 2001).

Independent Variables

Race. We use the term "race" in its broadest sense to include both racial and ethnic groups. Our sample consists of respondents who self-identify as African American, Hispanic American, or non-Hispanic white on Knowledge Networks' demographic profile of panel members.

Experiences with Police Misconduct. Questionnaire items address several areas of personal experience: unwarranted police stops, use of insulting language, use of excessive force, and corruption. Each question stipulates the site of misconduct as either the respondent's own neighborhood or elsewhere in his/her city (but outside the neighborhood), and with the exception of the corruption item, the questions examine both personal and vicarious experiences: (1) "Have you ever been stopped by police on the street without good reason?", (2) "Has anyone else in your household ever been stopped on the street by police without good reason?", (3) "Have the police ever used insulting language toward you?", (4) "Have the police ever used insulting language toward anyone else in your household?", (5) "Have police ever used excessive force against you?", (6) "Have police ever used excessive force against anyone else in your household?", and (7) "Have you ever seen a police officer engage in any corrupt activities (such as taking bribes or involvement in drug trade)?"⁶ We used responses to the four misconduct questions to create two composite indices of experience with misconduct: personal experiences (questions 1, 3, 5, 7)⁷ and vicarious experiences (questions 2, 4, 6). The indices are coded such that higher scores reflect more frequent experiences with misconduct. The alpha reliability coefficient for the personal experience index is .78, and for the vicarious experience index, .86.

Media Exposure. We asked the following question in order to gauge respondents' exposure to media accounts of police misconduct: "How often do you hear or read about (on the radio, television, or in the newspapers) incidents of police misconduct (such as police use of excessive force, verbal abuse, corruption, and so on) that occur somewhere in the nation?"

6. While corruption takes many forms, the two parenthetical examples in our question are major. Accepting bribes has been designated as "the prototypical form of corrupt behavior" and the policing of drug crimes is "particularly prone" to corrupting the police (Newburn 1999:5, 26).

7. Observation of police corruption is treated as a personal, rather than vicarious, experience because the actor has personally witnessed it, rather than learning of it from others.

Response options were “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” and “often” on a 4-point scale coded so that higher scores indicate more frequent reported exposure.⁸

Neighborhood Conditions. We examine three neighborhood conditions: personal safety, neighborhood crime, and community policing. We measure *personal safety* by asking: “Overall, how safe do you feel being alone outside in your neighborhood [during the day/at night]—very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, or very unsafe?” *Neighborhood crime* is measured with the following item: “How serious a problem is crime in your neighborhood—very serious, somewhat serious, not serious, or not a problem at all?” Responses to these questions are coded so that higher scores reflect less personal safety and more perceived crime. We measure *community policing* with the following question: “Community policing involves police officers working with community members to address the causes of crime and to prevent crimes from occurring, rather than just responding to crimes after they have occurred. Based on this definition, do you think the police in your neighborhood practice community policing?”

Controls. We control on several demographic factors: *education*, measured on a 9-step ladder ranging from less than high school (coded 1) to doctorate degree (coded 9); *household income*, measured on a 17-step ladder ranging from less than \$5,000 per year (coded 1) to \$125,000 or more (coded 17); *gender* (1 = male, 0 = female); *age*, in years; *region* (1 = south, 0 = nonsouth); and *place of residence*, measured with a dummy variable for city (coded 1) vs. suburb (coded 0).

Dependent Variable

Perceptions of Misconduct. A number of items tap citizens’ perceptions of police misconduct at the neighborhood and city levels, including perceptions of the prevalence of unjustified stops of citizens, verbal abuse, excessive force, and corruption. These items are analogous to the personal and vicarious experience questions from above: (1) “How often do you think police officers stop people on the streets of [your neighborhood; your city] without good reason—never, on occasion, fairly often, or very often?”; (2) “How often do you think police officers, when talking to people in [your neighborhood; your city] use insulting language against them—never, on occasion, fairly often, or very often?”; (3) “When police officers use force against people, how often do you think they use excessive force (in other words, more force than is necessary under the circumstances) against people in [your neighborhood; your city]—never, on occasion, fairly often, or very often?”; (4) “How common do you think corruption (such as taking bribes, involvement in the drug trade) is in your city’s police department—not at all common, not very common, fairly common, or very common?” We used responses to these questions to create two composite indices: perceived misconduct at the neighborhood level and perceived misconduct at the city level. The items are coded such that high scores reflect more negative perceptions. Alphas for both the city and neighborhood indices are .80.

Findings

Table 1 presents frequencies for each of the items that comprise the perceived misconduct and the experience indices. Questions 1–4 display respondents’ perceptions of police use

8. Because our media exposure measure is based on respondents’ self-reports, some caution is necessary in interpreting media effects. There may be some self-selection involved in exposure to media reports regarding the police, with people who are particularly interested in the police being more attentive than others. The media variable is also fairly broad, asking about exposure to reports of police abuse anywhere in the country. An alternative measure would ask specifically about media coverage of incidents in the respondent’s own city.

Table 1 • Perceptions and Experiences of Police Misconduct

	Neighborhood			City		
	Whites (%)	Blacks (%)	Hispanics (%)	Whites (%)	Blacks (%)	Hispanics (%)
Perceptions of misconduct						
1. How often do you think police officers stop people on the streets of your [neighborhood/city] without good reason?*						
Very often	2	18	12	5	27	18
Fairly often	5	18	15	11	27	20
On occasion	46	46	46	62	36	51
Never	46	19	27	23	11	11
N =	613	554	600	613	558	604
2. How often do you think police officers, when talking to people in your [neighborhood/city], use insulting language against them?*						
Very often	3	11	7	4	17	9
Fairly often	4	14	11	5	18	13
On occasion	36	44	33	48	45	41
Never	57	31	48	43	20	37
N =	609	553	592	613	553	594
3. When police officers use force against people, how often do you think they use excessive force (in other words, more force than is necessary under the circumstances) against people in your [neighborhood/city]?*						
Very often	3	15	12	5	26	16
Fairly often	4	15	11	8	22	13
On occasion	38	43	38	59	43	51
Never	55	26	40	29	9	20
N =	608	549	593	619	552	599
4. How common do you think corruption (such as taking bribes, involvement in drug trade) is in your city's police department?*						
Very common				6	22	9
Fairly common				11	26	20
Not very common				50	41	47
Not at all common				33	11	24
N =				613	555	592

(Continued)

of inappropriate street stops, insulting language, excessive force, and corruption, respectively. For each type of misconduct, blacks are the most likely to harbor negative views, whites are the least likely, and Hispanics fall between the two. For example, only 16 percent of whites believe that police very or fairly often stop people on the streets of their city without good reason, compared to 54 percent of blacks and 38 percent of Hispanics. Regarding the other types of misconduct, it is particularly noteworthy that almost half of the black respondents believe that police often engage in excessive force and corruption in their city.

Table 1 • (Continued)

	Neighborhood			City		
	Whites (%)	Blacks (%)	Hispanics (%)	Whites (%)	Blacks (%)	Hispanics (%)
Personal experiences						
5. Have you ever been stopped by police on the street without good reason [in your own neighborhood/elsewhere in your city]?*						
Yes	7	20	16	13	34	20
No	93	80	84	87	66	80
N =	615	562	604	612	559	598
6. Have the police ever used insulting language towards you [in your own neighborhood/elsewhere in your city]?*						
Yes	4	13	11	7	18	18
No	96	87	89	93	83	83
N =	617	561	602	614	559	597
7. Have police ever used excessive force against you [in your own neighborhood/elsewhere in your city]?*						
Yes	2	7	5	3	9	9
No	98	93	95	97	91	91
N =	617	561	603	613	555	600
8. Have you ever seen a police officer engage in any corrupt activities [in your neighborhood/elsewhere in your city]?*						
Yes	2	6	4	3	10	8
No	98	94	96	97	90	92
N =	618	565	601	619	562	600
Vicarious experiences						
9. Has anyone else in your household ever been stopped by police without good reason [in your own neighborhood/elsewhere in your city]?*						
Yes	7	25	17	11	31	21
No	93	75	83	89	69	79
N =	610	549	595	609	547	594
10. Have the police ever used insulting language toward anyone else in your household [in your own neighborhood/elsewhere in your city]?*						
Yes	5	17	12	7	19	18
No	95	83	88	93	81	82
N =	615	558	604	613	549	600
11. Have police ever used excessive force against anyone else in your household [in your own neighborhood/elsewhere in your city]?*						
Yes	4	10	8	5	13	10
No	97	90	92	95	87	90
N =	616	559	600	614	555	598

Note: Not all percentages sum to 100% due to rounding.

* $p < .01$ (chi-square).

African Americans are also much more likely than whites to take the extreme view that police misconduct occurs “very often.” Depending on the question, blacks are three to five times more likely to believe that misconduct frequently occurs in their city and at least three times more likely to say that it happens very often in their neighborhood. The white-Hispanic gap is also wide, though less so than for whites and blacks. One way of interpreting these results is in terms of the “rotten apple” vs. “rotten barrel” concepts in the policing literature (Walker and Katz 2002:328–9). People who believe that misconduct occurs infrequently may feel that it is limited to a few rotten apples in the police department, whereas people who see misconduct as widespread may view it as an institutionalized phenomenon, a rotten barrel. Police chiefs typically take the rotten apple approach when confronted with allegations of misconduct, while African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to embrace the rotten barrel explanation.

One reason why sizeable segments of minority populations may hold the rotten barrel perspective is their disproportionate experience with police abuse. The remaining entries in Table 1 present frequencies for our experiential variables—personal and vicarious experience of street stops, verbal abuse, excessive force, and corruption. In each case, blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to report experience with police misconduct. However, the two minority groups do not differ appreciably from each other, except with regard to unwarranted street stops. About a third of African Americans and a fifth of Hispanics report having been stopped by police in their city without good reason, and nearly as many say that this has happened to someone else in their household. Blacks may be stopped more often than Hispanics because skin color heightens their visibility.

In addition to the question of whether one has *ever experienced* some type of police misconduct, it is important to consider the issue of *repeated* abuse. Respondents who reported that they had been subjected to misconduct were asked how many times this had happened. Whites differ from the two minority groups in their vulnerability to such repeated abuses (data not shown in table). At the city level, 3 percent of whites, compared to 8 percent of blacks and Hispanics, say they have been verbally abused by the police three or more times; less than 1 percent of whites, compared to 3 percent of blacks and Hispanics, say that a police officer has used excessive force against them three or more times. The differences are more pronounced for street stops: 16 percent of blacks and 12 percent of Hispanics report that they have been unjustifiably stopped by police three or more times, compared to just 4 percent of whites. Such repeated experience with police mistreatment is likely to have adverse, cumulative effects on the recipients and, if others are told about these experiences, on others’ vicarious experiences.

People are somewhat less likely to regard police misconduct as common, and to experience some type of abuse, in their neighborhood than elsewhere in their city, and this is especially the case for blacks and Hispanics. One explanation for this is the police tendency to regard minorities as being “out of place” and more “suspicious” when they are observed in areas outside their own neighborhoods, which increases the chances of street stops and perhaps other abuse in the city context (Fagan and Davies 2000; Weitzer 1999).

The results in Table 1 point to race differences in perceptions of and reported experiences with police misconduct. Do these differences persist net of the influences of other variables, and what other factors besides race shape perceptions of the police? To answer these questions, we turn to the multivariate results in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 reports results from regressing the perception of misconduct indices on race and the demographic, neighborhood, media, and experience variables (for the sake of parsimony in the regression analyses, we combined responses to the city and neighborhood experience questions). The coefficients show that significant race differences in perceptions of police misconduct persist net of the influences of the other predictors. In both the city (model 1) and neighborhood (model 2) contexts, whites are significantly less likely than Hispanics and blacks to believe that police engage in misconduct, supporting Hypothesis 1, and Hispanics

Table 2 • OLS Regression Estimates for the Effects of the Predictors on Perceptions of Police Misconduct, Total Sample

	Model 1 City Misconduct			Model 2 Neighborhood Misconduct		
	<i>b</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>beta</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>beta</i>
Race						
Black ^a	1.161**	.148	.150	.663***	.117	.111
Hispanic ^a	.297*	.139	.040	.229*	.110	.040
Demographics						
Education	-.047	.030	-.030	-.049*	.024	-.041
Income	-.022	.013	-.033	-.012	.010	-.023
Gender (1 = male)	-.072	.096	-.014	.177*	.076	.044
Age	-.014***	.003	-.087	-.006**	.002	-.050
Residence (1 = city)	.682***	.102	.119	.283***	.081	.064
Region (1 = south)	.370***	.099	.067	-.030	.078	-.007
Neighborhood						
Safety (day)	-.088	.113	-.019	.137	.089	.039
Safety (night)	.307***	.086	.090	.219**	.068	.084
Neighborhood crime	.274***	.072	.078	.466***	.057	.174
Policing						
Comm. policing (1 = yes)	-.466***	.095	-.088	-.179*	.075	-.044
Media exposure	.809***	.067	.221	.177***	.053	.062
Personal experience	.639***	.050	.294	.464***	.040	.272
Vicarious experience	.380**	.047	.181	.409***	.037	.251
N of cases (unweighted)		1,495			1,504	
Constant		4.601			2.930	
R ² _{Adj}		.500			.475	

^a Whites are the reference group. The difference between the Hispanic and black coefficients is significant, $p < .001$.

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

are significantly less likely than blacks to hold this belief. Thus, the zero-order race differences in perceptions of police misconduct discussed above remain in the face of controls for the demographic, neighborhood, and policing variables.⁹

Although the other predictors in Table 2 are not of primary concern because they reflect pooled rather than race-specific estimates (the race-specific coefficients are shown in Table 3), we note that perceptions of police misconduct in *both* the city and the neighborhood (1)

9. We disaggregated the Hispanic sample by nationality and reran the models in Table 2 in an effort to identify nativity differences in views of police misconduct. Our data allow us to differentiate among Hispanics who identify their ancestry as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, and Caribbean or other Hispanic. We found that, net of the other predictors: (1) Puerto Ricans perceive significantly higher levels of police misconduct (in both city and neighborhood) than all other Hispanic groups (the only exception being that no difference exists between Puerto Ricans and Central and South Americans on neighborhood misconduct); and (2) the other nationality groups do not differ among themselves. Census data indicate that Puerto Ricans have lower incomes and a higher incidence of poverty than any other Hispanic group besides Dominicans. This relative disadvantage likely contributes to their more negative perceptions of the police, but more research is needed that disaggregates Hispanic nationality groups before definitive conclusions can be reached.

Table 3 • OLS Regression Estimates for the Effects of the Predictors on Perceptions of Police Misconduct, by Race

Independent Variables	Whites			Blacks			Hispanics		
	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	<i>beta</i>	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	<i>beta</i>	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	<i>beta</i>
Model 1. City Misconduct									
Demographics									
Education	-.031	.045	-.024	.138 ^c	.082	.066	-.129* ^c	.060	-.074
Income	-.047*	.021	-.076	.021	.029	.028	-.019	.024	-.029
Gender (1 = male)	-.026	.148	-.006	-.386	.253	-.062	-.093	.189	-.017
Age	-.014**	.004	-.105	-.015*	.008	-.075	-.008	.007	-.042
Residence (1 = city)	.651***	.149	.140	.793**	.256	.119	.421	.220	.063
Region (1 = south)	.519*** ^b	.152	.110	.179	.235	.029	-.031 ^b	.203	-.005
Neighborhood									
Safety (day)	.143	.193	.030	-.377	.245	-.082	-.322	.186	-.088
Safety (night)	.264*	.135	.083	.666*** ^c	.201	.179	.059 ^c	.159	.020
Neighborhood crime	.190 ^b	.113	.060	.289	.156	.079	.576*** ^b	.122	.181
Policing									
Comm. policing (1 = yes)	-.407**	.144	-.091	-.448	.241	-.072	-.435*	.187	-.079
Media exposure	.610*** ^a	.108	.185	1.140*** ^a	.142	.299	.892***	.119	.257
Personal experience	.808*** ^a	.093	.366	.509*** ^a	.089	.280	.679***	.076	.355
Vicarious experience	.260**	.086	.126	.383***	.084	.207	.410***	.072	.218
N of cases (unweighted)		547			440			508	
Constant		5.187			3.600			5.183	
R ² _{Adj}		.422			.416			.490	
Model 2. Neighborhood Misconduct									
Demographics									
Education	-.054	.035	-.055	.052 ^c	.064	.032	-.141*** ^c	.054	-.093
Income	-.026	.017	-.054	-.008	.022	-.014	.005	.022	.009
Gender (1 = male)	.109	.114	.032	.018	.196	.004	.375*	.170	.078
Age	-.007*	.003	-.075	-.002	.006	-.015	.003	.006	.016
Residence (1 = city)	.340**	.115	.096	.371	.202	.069	.210	.197	.036
Region (1 = south)	-.054	.118	-.015	.084	.181	.017	-.037	.182	-.007
Neighborhood									
Safety (day)	.341** ^a	.149	.097	-.202 ^a	.186	-.055	-.040	.167	-.012
Safety (night)	.177	.105	.074	.368**	.154	.124	.066	.142	.026
Neighborhood crime	.330*** ^{a,b}	.087	.138	.633*** ^a	.120	.220	.729*** ^b	.110	.261
Policing									
Comm. policing (1 = yes)	-.182	.112	-.054	-.404*	.187	-.082	.048	.168	.010
Media exposure	.007 ^{a,b}	.084	.003	.471*** ^a	.110	.155	.275** ^b	.106	.091
Personal experience	.507***	.072	.302	.387***	.070	.262	.561***	.068	.332
Vicarious experience	.332***	.067	.211	.387***	.065	.262	.482***	.064	.294
N of cases (unweighted)		548			443			513	
Constant		3.764			2.109			2.486	
R ² _{Adj}		.402			.424			.461	

^a The white and black slope coefficients differ significantly, $p < .05$.

^b The white and Hispanic slope coefficients differ significantly, $p < .05$.

^c The black and Hispanic slope coefficients differ significantly, $p < .05$.

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

significantly decrease with higher age and residence in an area that practices community policing; and (2) are significantly higher among those who reside in the city (vs. suburb), feel unsafe at night, believe crime is serious in their neighborhood, are frequently exposed to media reports of police abuse, and who have had personal or vicarious experiences with police misconduct. Some other variables significantly shape views of misconduct in the city *or* neighborhood, but not both: higher education and being female decreases perceptions of neighborhood misconduct, and southerners are more likely than nonsoutherners to perceive misconduct at the city level.

Having established that race differences in perceived misconduct persist after controlling for other factors, we now address the question of how these other factors shape whites,' blacks,' and Hispanics' views of police misconduct. Table 3 reports results from fitting regression models to the data separately by racial group. Model 1 presents coefficients from the regression of perceived misconduct in one's city on the predictors; Model 2 presents coefficients for perceived neighborhood misconduct.

Among the demographic factors, income and education have generally weak, nonsignificant effects on perceptions of misconduct. Higher income whites tend to view police misconduct as less common in their cities than do lower income whites, and better-educated Hispanics are less negative than their less well-educated peers about city and neighborhood misconduct, but in no other case does education or income make a difference. With few exceptions, neither gender nor region has an effect among any group (the exceptions are that Hispanic men are more negative than Hispanic women about police misconduct in their neighborhoods, and southern whites perceive more misconduct by city police than do non-southern whites). Among both whites and blacks, younger respondents perceive more police misconduct at the city level than do their older counterparts, and younger whites also perceive more misconduct in their neighborhoods. Finally, city-dwelling whites are more likely than their suburban counterparts to perceive police misconduct at both city and neighborhood levels, and city-dwelling blacks perceive more city misconduct; residence has no effect on Hispanics' views of police misconduct. That city residence exerts some effect for blacks and whites is understandable in light of the fact that policing is typically more problematic in urban areas than in the suburbs.

Without exception, personal and vicarious experiences with police misconduct increase the view that misconduct is common in both city and neighborhood contexts for each racial group, strongly supporting Hypothesis 2.

As predicted by Hypothesis 3, frequent exposure to media accounts of police misconduct increases perceptions of the scope of misconduct for each racial group at both the city and neighborhood levels (with one exception—whites' views about neighborhood misconduct). The effect of media exposure—especially among blacks and Hispanics, who report more frequent media exposure than whites (see Appendix)—is robust, among the strongest effects in each model. Frequent exposure to media accounts of police abuse has a powerful influence, increasing the belief that police misconduct happens often.

What about personal safety and crime in one's neighborhood? Fears about personal safety at night (for whites and blacks) and a belief that crime is serious (for Hispanics) increase the perception that police misconduct occurs frequently at the city level. But the more salient question is whether neighborhood crime conditions affect perceptions of the police in the neighborhood context. For all three groups, where neighborhood crime is viewed as serious, residents are more likely to believe that police misconduct occurs in their neighborhood. This is especially the case for blacks and Hispanics, who, as the Appendix shows, are more likely than whites to live in areas plagued by serious crime. Fears about personal safety during the day (among whites) and at night (among blacks) also increase the perception of misconduct at the neighborhood level. Hypothesis 4 is thus largely supported.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that residents of neighborhoods with community policing would be less inclined than those living in areas lacking community policing to believe that police

misconduct happens frequently. Our results show that community policing (as perceived by respondents) indeed makes a difference in assessments of the level of misconduct in either the respondent's neighborhood or elsewhere in their city. Whites and Hispanics who reportedly live in neighborhoods with community policing are less likely to believe that misconduct occurs frequently in their city, and blacks whose neighborhoods have community policing are less likely to believe that misconduct is prevalent in their neighborhood. Consistent with arguments advanced by advocates of community policing, it appears that community policing does engender better relations between citizens and the police in the neighborhood or more broadly at the city level.

Hypothesis 6 and the resonance thesis predict that the effect of frequent exposure to media accounts of police abuse is likely to be especially strong among residents of high-crime neighborhoods. To address this possibility we incremented the two models in Table 3 with a multiplicative term for the media-neighborhood crime interaction (results not shown in table).¹⁰ No significant interactions emerged among Hispanics or whites in either the city or neighborhood misconduct models. Among blacks, the media-neighborhood crime interaction was significant in both city and neighborhood models: the effect of media exposure on attitudes regarding police misconduct (1) in the city is nearly twice as strong among black residents of perceived high-crime neighborhoods as among residents of neighborhoods with less perceived crime ($b = 1.640$ and $.950$, respectively, $p < .05$), and (2) in the neighborhood is nearly three times stronger among black residents of high-crime than low-crime communities ($.871$ and $.297$, respectively, $p < .05$). Therefore, the resonance thesis and Hypothesis 6 are supported for one racial group. For blacks who are frequently exposed to media coverage of misconduct, this exposure "resonates" with their perceptions of neighborhood crime.

Discussion

The findings show that race structures citizens' views of police misconduct. Both the bivariate and multivariate analyses document race differences in perceptions of and reported experiences with misconduct. Whites tend to be favorably disposed toward the police and inclined to deny the existence of police misconduct, an attitude reflected by the very high percentages who say the police are never or only occasionally involved in corruption, excessive force, verbal abuse, and unwarranted stops of citizens. Blacks and Hispanics are more inclined to believe that these abuses occur frequently, and to subscribe to the view that police misconduct is *very common* in their city and in their residential neighborhood. People who take this view may see the entire police department as rotten, which can have important implications for the overall legitimacy of a police agency and for people's willingness to cooperate with its officers.

Blacks and Hispanics are also more likely than whites to report personal and vicarious experience with police misconduct, and to report that they have been the recipients of repeated abuse. In other words, it is not simply a matter of racial disparities in the occurrence of abuse; disparities also exist in the *frequency* of abuse.

However, our race findings are more complex than a simple white vs. minority pattern. Hispanics typically perceive and reportedly experience more police abuse than whites but less than blacks. Indeed, Hispanics are *much* less likely than blacks to believe that some types of police misconduct (e.g., verbal abuse, corruption) occur very often.

The Hispanic-black disparity helps address one unanswered question in the literature on police-minority relations—that is, whether blacks and Hispanics share a minority-group perspective vs. a white majority-group perspective, or whether perceptions take the form of a

10. For the interaction analysis, the perceived neighborhood crime variable was dichotomized into "very" or "somewhat serious," and "not serious" or "not a problem at all."

white-Hispanic-African American racial hierarchy. As indicated earlier, the literature is not yet sufficient to determine conclusively whether Hispanics' relations with the police support the minority-group or racial-hierarchy thesis, but when it comes to the types of police misconduct examined in this article, we find that blacks and Hispanics do differ significantly, consistent with the racial-hierarchy thesis.

The findings also lend support to the racial group-position model, as applied to orientations toward institutions like the police. We have argued that the proclivity of whites to discount or minimize police misconduct reflects their basic affinity with the police. Allegations of police misconduct, often made by leaders within the minority community, may be perceived as interfering with the pursuit of law and order and, thus, as a threat to whites' perceived group interest in maximizing crime control. Blacks, by contrast, are inclined to believe that police misconduct is common, and many Hispanics share this view. While most blacks and Hispanics (along with whites) desire more law enforcement and crime control, they are simultaneously interested in ensuring that police minimize abuses of citizens, and particularly of minority citizens, who are disproportionately the recipients of mistreatment. Thus, blacks and Hispanics may well believe that their group interests would be advanced by greater controls on police (Weitzer and Tuch 2004).

To further explore these racial differences, we examined several non-demographic influences on perceptions. Most of the research on police-citizen relations has examined the effects of citizens' demographic characteristics on public opinion of the police. This research tradition has produced important findings that go a long way toward identifying the individual-level attributes that influence attitudes toward the police (see Brown and Benedict 2002). Our findings indicate, however, that demographic factors do not fully capture the determinants of public opinion. Citizens' views of the police are also strongly influenced by certain micro- and macro-level forces—particularly citizens' experiences during encounters with officers as well as exposure to mass media reports on the police. The robust nature of these situational and macro-level predictors in the present study suggests that they may be important elements of any comprehensive explanatory framework of police-citizen relations and, hence, deserve more attention in future research.

Particularly noteworthy is the mass media's role in shaping public opinion of police misconduct. Net of other factors, repeated exposure to media reports on police abuse is one of the strongest predictors of citizens' perceptions of misconduct. People who frequently read or hear about incidents of misconduct, as presented in the media, are inclined to believe that misconduct is a common occurrence in both their city and their neighborhood, and such media exposure affects blacks, Hispanics, and whites alike (though minorities more strongly). A few previous studies, cited earlier, suggest that single, publicized incidents of misconduct reduce approval of the police, and our results extend this finding to persons who are exposed to recurrent media reports over time. The fact that we have only a single-item, self-report measure of media exposure, and that the question pertains to media reports of police abuse anywhere in the country rather than being limited to the respondent's locale, obviously limits the conclusions that can be drawn regarding media effects. But the congruence of our media findings with those reported in other studies does lend credence to our results. Though it is usually overlooked by researchers who study public perceptions of the police, the mass media appears to be an important determinant of those perceptions.

Neighborhood conditions are also associated with perceptions of police misconduct. The view that neighborhood crime is serious and feeling unsafe in one's neighborhood both increase the odds that police misconduct will be viewed as pervasive. Why? It is possible that our two crime measures are related to local policing problems. It should be noted that high-crime areas are also the sites where police-community relations tend to be problematic—where police, in their efforts to fight crime, are more prone to act obtrusively and aggressively against residents. Residents of such areas are more vulnerable to being stopped on the street, verbally abused, and physically roughed up (Fagan and Davies 2000; Smith 1986;

Terrill and Reisig 2003). Also more prevalent in high-crime areas is police corruption—including theft of money or drugs from suspects, bribe-taking, and falsification of evidence (Mollen Commission 1994). Police appear to cast a wide net of suspicion in neighborhoods that they view as especially troublesome, resulting in more indiscriminate treatment and more mistreatment of residents. Police typifications of residents of high-crime neighborhoods may thus increase the aggregate level of police misconduct toward those residents. These patterns may help to explain the association between the neighborhood crime situation and perceptions of police misconduct.

Finally, we found an interaction effect for African Americans between media exposure and neighborhood crime. This means that blacks who live in neighborhoods perceived as having serious crime problems and who are heavily exposed to media accounts of police misconduct are especially likely to believe that misconduct is common in both their neighborhood and elsewhere in their city. The finding of a media-crime interaction is consistent with the “resonance thesis” described earlier. According to this perspective, when media reports are consistent with objective conditions, the two may have a powerful combined effect on an individual’s perceptions, greater than the effect of media exposure alone. Persons who live in high-crime areas may be particularly sensitive to media reports on police misconduct because these reports resonate with residents’ knowledge of police misconduct in their neighborhoods.

Why are blacks, but not whites or Hispanics, affected by this media-crime interaction? The resonance perspective would point to the real-world conditions that make people susceptible to media influences. When blacks report that crime is “serious” in their neighborhoods, it is likely to be at a higher order of seriousness than what whites define as serious in their neighborhoods (Liska and Bellair 1995; Logan and Stults 1999). In the present study, respondents who reported that crime was a serious neighborhood problem were asked to identify which of several types of crime were serious. Blacks and Hispanics were equally likely to report that armed robbery was a serious neighborhood problem, and both groups were more likely than whites to say that this was a problem. However, blacks were more likely than both whites and Hispanics to report that drug dealing and shootings were serious problems in their neighborhood. Such differences in crime levels help to explain why an interaction between neighborhood crime and exposure to media reports is found for blacks but not for whites or Hispanics.

In conclusion, our findings speak to the question of *why* race structures attitudes toward the police. As indicated earlier, much of the literature documents race differences but does not adequately explain them. Our extension of the group-position thesis holds that views of social institutions will be influenced by group interests and perceived threats. Dominant groups should perceive the police as an institution allied with their interests, whereas minorities should be more inclined to view the police as contributing to their subordination. This does not mean that minority group members are necessarily critical of the police, but it does increase the odds that they will believe that police misconduct is a serious problem, whereas whites tend to discount or minimize it and perhaps view criticisms as a threat to a revered institution. These predictions are generally supported by our findings. In addition, our data also point to the role of several micro- and macro-level factors in fostering racial differences in evaluations of the police. In other words, the greater tendency for blacks and Hispanics to perceive police misconduct is largely a function of their disproportionate adverse experiences with police officers, exposure to media reports of police abuse, and residence in high-crime neighborhoods where police practices may be contentious. Views of the police are thus related to racial differences not only in general group-position relationships, but also in real or perceived group vulnerability to abusive police practices.

Appendix

Table A • Descriptive Statistics: Means (and Standard Deviations) on All Study Variables

	Total Sample	Whites	African Americans	Hispanics
Education	4.06 (1.68)	4.18 (1.69) ^{a,b}	3.72 (1.52) ^{a,c}	3.33 (1.59) ^{b,c}
Income	9.94 (3.95)	10.34 (3.70) ^{a,b}	8.59 (4.12) ^a	8.86 (4.14) ^b
Gender (1 = male)	.49 (.50)	.50 (.50) ^a	.44 (.50) ^a	.49 (.50)
Age	45.40 (16.74)	47.43 (16.93) ^{a,b}	40.49 (15.52) ^{a,c}	37.43 (14.39) ^{b,c}
Residence (1 = city)	.70 (.46)	.65 (.48) ^{a,b}	.70 (.46) ^{a,c}	.79 (.41) ^{b,c}
Region (1 = south)	.35 (.48)	.32 (.47) ^a	.51 (.50) ^{a,c}	.28 (.45) ^c
Safety (day)	1.36 (.61)	1.26 (.55) ^{a,b}	1.56 (.68) ^a	1.63 (.77) ^b
Safety (night)	1.77 (.80)	1.66 (.75) ^{a,b}	2.00 (.85) ^a	2.06 (.92) ^b
Neighborhood crime	1.96 (.78)	1.84 (.72) ^{a,b}	2.27 (.86) ^a	2.19 (.88) ^b
Comm. policing (1 = yes)	.55 (.50)	.54 (.50)	.57 (.50)	.53 (.50)
Media exposure	2.97 (.73)	2.89 (.68) ^{a,b}	3.25 (.79) ^{a,c}	3.07 (.80) ^{b,c}
Personal experience	.57 (1.25)	.42 (1.05) ^{a,b}	1.05 (1.66) ^a	.93 (1.55) ^b
Vicarious experience	.54 (1.29)	.37 (1.10) ^{a,b}	1.02 (1.67) ^a	.88 (1.51) ^b
Perceptions of misconduct (city)	8.05 (2.71)	7.45 (2.32) ^{a,b}	9.97 (3.06) ^{a,c}	8.90 (2.83) ^{b,c}
Perceptions of misconduct (neighborhood)	5.17 (2.09)	4.79 (1.77) ^{a,b}	6.46 (2.45) ^{a,c}	5.95 (2.41) ^{b,c}

^a The white and African American means are significantly different, $p < .05$.

^b The white and Hispanic means are significantly different, $p < .05$.

^c The African American and Hispanic means are significantly different, $p < .05$.

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