Show Me, Don’t Tell Me:
A Picturesque View of Perceptions of Police

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ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

A positive relationship between law enforcement and the public is critical for the effective operation of the agency and continued safety of the community. The public’s perception of law enforcement officers is one indication of the nature of that relationship. Past research on perception of the police has used questionnaires to untangle how the public views officers. This research uses an alternative method to measure the public’s perceptions of the police by asking respondents to draw a picture of a police officer. By analyzing the drawings, it can be seen what characteristics people identify with law enforcement. This study analyzed the drawings of 443 respondents. The findings show that there are differences in perceptions of the police based on the respondent’s gender and race, but not age. Other findings show that female respondents are likely to draw female officers, but male respondents are not. Items included in the drawings (e.g., a badge, gun, facial hair) were also examined. Future research using this method of measuring perceptions of the police with different demographic groups will help us more fully understand the public’s insight into law enforcement.

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A positive relationship between law enforcement and the public is critical for the effective operation of any police agency. Citizens rely on the police for their safety and security, but at the same time, police rely on citizens to provide them with details about criminal acts that may occur or have occurred, possible suspects, or the location of evidence. Without the assistance of the public, the investigatory function of law enforcement would be much less effective. The public will be much more willing to provide this assistance to the police if they have a positive perception of them. What people think about the police, about their role in the community, and about their effectiveness can affect their willingness to help law enforcement.

Past research on perception of the police has used surveys and questionnaires to untangle how the public views officers. The current study measures the public’s perceptions of law enforcement through an alternative method: human figure drawings. It is thought that some respondents will be able to communicate their thoughts more effectively by drawing their idea of what a police officer looks like rather than writing them down or answering questions. By using this technique, additional information about citizen’s perception of police can be identified to add to, not replace, the information gathered through surveys and questionnaires. Participants were asked to draw a picture of a police officer as a way to determine what characteristics an individual considers to be important for an officer. The resulting patterns were compared to those found when surveys are employed to collect this data. In some areas, the patterns were very similar; in others, the results were divergent. Differences in participant depictions of officers based on the participants’ gender, age, and race were also analyzed.

**Literature Review**

The public’s perceptions of the police are important to law enforcement. Officers are dependent upon their relationships with the members of a neighborhood or community so that they can perform their jobs effectively (García & Cao, 2005). They rely on the public to report crimes that occur and volunteer information about those crimes. The police often turn to the public for help with investigating crimes and, when needed, to testify in court as a witness. The notion that the public is more likely to assist officers if they have a positive image or perception of the police is evident (Taylor et al., 2001). Without a high level of trust, citizens will not be likely to cooperate with the police in reporting crimes, in acting as witnesses, or in willingly testifying in court (Goudriaan et al., 2004; President’s Task Force, 2015; Skogan & Frydl, 2004). If the community views the police as just and fair, they will be more likely to give credence to their orders and obey when asked to respond (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tankebe, 2013; Tyler, 2006). In short, a good relationship between the police and the public is needed for effective law enforcement, and a positive perception of the police by the public is an essential part of maintaining the safety of a community (Hurst & Frank, 2000).

Extensive academic research exists on citizens’ perceptions of the police and law enforcement. The earliest studies appeared in the 1960s, driven by the concern about the relationship between the police and the community (Scaglioni & Condon, 1980). These early studies found that attitudes toward the police were generally positive and that the public was supportive (Cleaver et al., 1966; Ennis, 1967; Smith, 1969). Perceptions of the police were determined by the respondent’s fear of future or past victimization (Gourley, 1954) and whether a citizen witnessed police acting inappropriately (Cleaver et al., 1966). Since then, multiple studies have concluded that there is a combination of factors that influence a person’s perception of the police (Klein et al., 1978), and while the exact factors that drive perception of the police are still unknown, most agree that perception of police is most often linked to a person’s race, age, and gender.

**Age**

A more limited number of studies have examined the effect of age on the perception of police (Engel, 2005; Peek et al., 1981). In general, older individuals are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of confidence with law enforcement when compared to younger individuals (Cao et al., 1996), leading to the conclusion that “age, rather than race, is the best predictor” of attitudes toward police ( Peek et al., 1981, p. 361, 370). One study reported that 64% of respondents in their 20s had a “great deal of respect” for police, but for those who were 50 or older, 82% reported these same feelings (Hindelang, 1974).

Many researchers have focused on the attitudes that juveniles hold toward police. In general, they show that young people are more critical of police than adults (Jesilow et al., 1995). They do not like the police, they are not satisfied with them, nor do they trust them (Hurst & Frank, 2000). Brunson and Miller (2006) interviewed youth about their interactions with police, who described police as “impolite and difficult to talk to” (p. 539) and often “viewed them as criminal” (p. 541). The negative sentiments held by
youth toward law enforcement “may undermine police legitimacy” (Wu et al., 2015, p. 446).

**Gender**

A person’s gender can affect their perception of police. Females tend to have more support than males. They tend to rate police more positively than males (Brandl et al., 1994) and show more confidence in police (Cao et al., 1996). Female juveniles also tend to support police more so than males (Taylor et al., 2001). However, more recent research shows that young females who have interactions with law enforcement describe that police “treat them as suspects from the onset” and “were not responsive” when called (Brunson & Miller, 2006, p. 542).

**Human Figure Drawings**

It is the norm for authors who study perception of police to rely on questionnaires or interviews with individuals employing close-ended questions to determine what people think of officers (Buckler & Unnever, 2008; Cochran & Warren, 2012; Gabbidon et al., 2011; Gabbidon et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2015). Others have used surveys with open-ended questions (Bridenball & Jesilow, 2008; Solis et al., 2009) or a hybrid of open-ended and close-ended questions to determine the public’s opinion of law enforcement (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Frank et al., 2005).

An alternative (albeit yet-unused) method to test perception of police is to have an individual draw a picture of an officer. This method, called a “draw a human” or “draw a person” projective test, is a type of analysis in which a participant is provided with a word, image, or situation and asked to draw their response. Respondents are typically given few or no directions, and no restrictions are placed on their responses. In fact, it is desired that minimal directions are provided so there is little interference or influence by the analyst. When completed, the drawings that result are analyzed. The pictures are evaluated to look for specific elements in the picture, or even elements that have been omitted. For example, analysts will look at the size of the person that the participant drew, and the shape of the person, and where it is drawn on the page. Other critical elements include the size of the head, the placement of arms, mouth, or teeth (Kahill, 1984). The end goal is to identify the emotions or perceptions of the individual and to understand more about the unconscious emotions, thoughts, and perceptions of the respondent (Cerdan, 2017).

The drawing technique has never been used to examine perception of law enforcement. It has its origins in the field of psychoanalysis, often used by doctors who were seeking to understand a person’s personality style or traits (Cerdan, 2017) or to test a person’s intelligence (Rehrig & Stromswold, 2018). They are often used with assessments of children, particularly by school counselors, to determine the intellectual development of the child. The child is asked to draw a picture of a person, which is used to determine the child’s level of cognitive, developmental, and emotional skills, (Bonoti & Misalidi, 2015; Short et al., 2011); social perceptions (Lamm et al., 2019; Lomax, 2012; Yedidia & Lipschitz-Elchawli, 2012); and self-esteem/self-perception (Groth-Marnat & Roberts, 1998; Racheli & Tova, 2011; Short et al., 2011). It is a method used to allow children to convey their opinions (Horstman et al., 2008) or to assist them to explain sexual trauma (Teoh et al., 2009). Drawing techniques have been used with youth to test their perceptions of school safety (Biag, 2014). The drawing technique has been used with adjudicated adolescents to help understand their feelings and behaviors.

Human figure drawing techniques are often used when studying medical patients and their perception of illness as a way to assist in treatment (Barel-Shoshani & Kreitler, 2017; Hui & Slaughter, 2008; Petrie & Weinman, 2012). The techniques have been used in other adult populations, including student teachers (Bennett, 2012; Weber & Mitchell, 1996), abused elderly populations (Lev-Wiesel & Kleinberg, 2002), undergraduate students (Beisler & Medaille, 2016), and on academics (Morey et al., 2018).

**Advantages**

There has been a growing interest in the use of non-textual or participant-generated visual methods as an alternative to traditional language-based survey research methods. Data amassed through respondent drawings provide advantages over traditional survey method that often cannot be accessed by the use of traditional survey methods (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Pain, 2012). When a respondent draws their reaction rather than responding orally or in writing, they are better able to express their subconscious knowledge or perceptions. Drawings may encourage the respondent to reflect more on their response and thereby provide a more complete depiction of the person or event (Gauntlett, 2007). Drawing tests can be particularly useful as they do not depend on the linguistic proficiency of the respondent (Literat, 2013).

Researchers explain that a drawing allows for spontaneous expression of a person’s inner feelings or attitudes and provides diverse types of information (Barel-Shoshani & Kreitler, 2017; Rubin, 2011). By allowing an individual to draw their response, the participant has a greater opportunity to consider their deeper personal feelings about the individual they are drawing. This technique permits a person to “circumvent the inherent linear mode of speech—one
thing leading to another—and present a set of ideas all in one go” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 126).

At the same time, drawings allow the respondent to display group values that may exist in their particular cultural environment. Respondents will express their experiences with the person (Weber & Mitchell, 1996) as well as a group’s experiences. The drawings may reflect concerns that may not emerge through a written response (Beisler & Medaille, 2016). Thus, a researcher using a “draw a human” test is more likely to access evidence that may be difficult to reach through other modes of data collection (Literat, 2013). Creative data collection such as this enhances and broadens the scope of data that is collected in traditional ways (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Pain, 2012) and helps to add to our knowledge of perceptions and attitudes (Gauntlett, 2007).

Interpretation

Once the drawings are completed, they must be interpreted by the researcher. The drawings that are provided by the participant are a type of text and therefore can be “read” (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Certain characteristics of a drawing can be identified and a meaning attached to them. For example, the size of the human drawing can indicate the importance attributed to the person by the respondent. Specific features or details of the drawing are also critical. This includes the overall shape of the person. A larger figure shows the drawer feels the person is domineering, aggressive, or frightening whereas a small figure indicates the respondent may feel helpless and frightened (Lev-Wiesel & Kleinberg, 2002). Where the figure was placed on the page may show how the respondent views the person relative to others.

However, the process of translating the drawings can be viewed as a distinct disadvantage of using the human drawing technique. There are no standard instructions for analyzing what the respondent has drawn (Silverman, 2001), so it is not unusual for two experts who analyze the same pictures to come to different conclusions. There are interpretation biases and inconsistency of results, and the results can be influenced by the examiner’s attitudes (Cerdan, 2017). There can be a lack of agreement as to what specific elements represent (Peterson & Hardin, 1997). The analysis of drawings is subjective and the validity of the results can be hard to prove. Thus, some researchers admit that the results of analyses of human drawing techniques are flawed and inaccurate (Kahill, 1984). They conclude that the validity of interpretation of drawings is questionable as a psychological test (Matto & Naglieri, 2005; Naglieri et al., 1991), and the evaluators have been criticized (Bow et al., 2002).

Despite the problems with the human drawing technique, the limitations of this method are arguably outweighed by the advantages (Gauntlett, 2017). Such innovative visual methods of data collection are useful and have become accepted methods for qualitative research, and they are now used in many disciplines (Creswell, 2013; Pain, 2012). It has been suggested that specific steps should be followed when analyzing results to give them more validity (Joiner & Schmidt, 1997). One suggestion is that evaluators use a form to standardize their interpretation of the drawings. The scoring, or interpretation, of the drawings should be completed by identifying particular items prior to interpreting the drawings and indicating if those items or criteria are present (Schock & Harrison, 1998). It should also be noted that a drawing represents what that participant was thinking on the day the drawing was done and could change at a future time (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Because of the concerns with the validity of the technique, the results should not be admitted into court (Lally, 2001).

Application to Community Perception of Law Enforcement

To date, the human drawing technique has not been used as a way to measure the public’s perception of law enforcement. Instead, perception of police has largely been identified through surveys and questionnaires. By asking individuals to draw their perception of a police officer, we are allowing participants to express their perceptions in an alternative way that may encourage more thought and expression, providing a more in-depth depiction of law enforcement officers. When asked to draw an officer, the respondent is not limited to the questions posed by the researcher, or to putting their response into words. The respondents will not be influenced by the questions posed in a survey. It may result in a more complete response from the participant.

The drawing technique is not used to replace or supplant the survey technique. Instead, it is meant to augment, or enhance, the knowledge of police perception that has been collected in the past. One way in which it is believed this technique will expand our knowledge on the public’s attitudes toward law enforcement is through the technique’s ability to gauge what items and appearance-based factors (e.g., a gun, a badge, facial hair) appear to influence those attitudes. This information could be valuable to law enforcement agencies seeking to improve their community relations.
Method

The current study examines an alternative method for measuring the public’s perception of police than what has been used in past studies. Instead of asking people to respond to questions to decipher their opinions of police, we asked respondents to draw a picture of a police officer. This way, respondents have the chance to convey what they feel a typical police officer looks like or what kind of equipment they employ without being influenced or limited by questions posed by researchers. This method allows respondents to choose what factors they believe are most relevant when they think of an officer. This method builds on and expands past research by measuring police perception in a different way. This alternative approach to measuring perception is compelling because research shows that the appearance of police can influence the public’s satisfaction with law enforcement (Garcia & Cao, 2005). How a person perceives an officer may be determined more effectively by a drawing than a questionnaire.

Our goal in employing this methodology is twofold. First, we wanted to discover what prior findings—if any—could be corroborated through the use of this method. This would test the legitimacy of this method of measuring perception of police. Second, this would provide additional support to earlier findings on how factors such as gender, race, and age affect what people think about law enforcement. This adds to the current literature on perceptions of police by testing an alternative method for measuring the public’s views on police. There are six primary hypotheses tested in this analysis, as described below.

Hypothesis 1: Race and Perception of Police

As noted above, African-American, Latino, and Hispanic residents are more likely to sense injustice at the hands of police and have less favorable attitudes towards police (Buckler et al., 2008; Cochran & Warren, 2012; Wu et al., 2009). At least one study (Weitzer & Tuch, 1999) suggests that a citizen’s race is the strongest predictor of attitudes toward police. Based on these findings, it is proposed that there will be a link between the race of the respondent and their perception of police, with Black and Hispanic respondents more likely to express negative perceptions of police than White respondents.

Hypothesis 2: Age and Perception of Police

Younger people tend to have more negative attitudes towards police and are less likely to report that they were treated fairly by police, irrespective of race (Gabbidon et al., 2011; Gabbidon et al., 2009). Thus, it is hypothesized that there will be a relationship between the age of the respondents and their perception of police, with younger respondents more likely to express negative perceptions of police than older respondents.

Hypothesis 3: Gender of Respondent and Perception of Police

Males have more negative attitudes towards police compared to females, regardless of race and ethnicity (Cochran & Warren, 2012; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). Therefore, it is proposed that there will be a relationship between a respondent’s gender and their perception of the police, with female respondents more likely to express positive perceptions of police than male respondents.

Hypothesis 4: Gender of Officer Drawn and Perception of Police

Citizens have more positive attitudes towards female officers than male officers. They report that female officers are more pleasant and respectful than their male counter parts (Sichel, 1979), and they receive fewer citizen complaints of excessive use of force than male officers (National Center for Women & Policing, 2002; Walker, 2003). Thus, it is proposed that there will be a relationship between the gender of the officer drawn by respondents and the respondent’s perception of the police, with respondents expressing more positive perceptions of female officers than male officers.

Hypothesis 5: Gender of Respondent and Gender of Officer

Past research found that male college students tend to perceive female officers as less competent and unable to meet the demands of the job. These attitudes appear to stem from the belief that female officers are less likely to possess the physical strength or emotional fortitude required to properly perform the job (Austin & Hummer, 2000; Haba et al., 2009). Recent research indicates that student attitudes towards female officers were the same as they had been three decades earlier (Verrecchia & Sloan, 2013). Based on the research, it is believed that there will be a relationship between the gender of respondents and the gender of the officer drawn. Specifically, it is proposed that female respondents will be more likely to draw a picture of a female officer than male respondents. The question is different than the question posed in Hypothesis 4, which focuses on
the public’s perception of female officers. The question posed here is whether the public feels women should be officers in the first place.

**Hypothesis 6: Appearance and Perception of Police**

The physical appearance of a police officer can influence the public’s satisfaction with law enforcement (Garcia & Cao, 2005). Our research in this area is partly exploratory in that we hope to find which appearance-related factors influence the public’s attitudes towards the police. However, while there are no specific aspects of an officer’s appearance that we hypothesize will have a relationship to a respondent’s perception of that officer, we do hypothesize that there will be a relationship between some aspects of an officer’s appearance and respondents’ perception of the police.

**Procedure**

The respondents for this research consist of college students at the University of Akron, a public university of approximately 20,000 students. The participating students were aged 18 and above, of all majors, who attended one of 10 general classes during the Spring of 2017. The classes chosen were a mix of a large section, introductory-level courses (Introduction to American Government, Introduction to Sociology, and Introduction to Criminal Justice) and upper level courses. Students in graduate-level and law classes were also asked to participate. Participation was completely voluntary. Students were not given any incentive to complete the task, and any person who chose not to participate could opt out. If a student was enrolled in more than one class included in the study, they were only permitted to submit one picture. A total of 443 respondents completed the form provided. The forms were quite basic. Participants were asked simply to draw a picture of a police officer and were given 10-15 minutes to complete the task. Basic demographic data (race, sex, age) was also requested at the bottom of the form. No identifying marks were required. IRB approval was received prior to the start of the study.

The contents of the pictures were then coded based on standardized criteria to increase the validity of the research (Joiner & Schmidt, 1997; Schock & Harrison, 1998). The officer depicted in the picture was identified as male or female, and items such as the size of the figure, inclusion or omission of particular items (badge, gun, handcuffs), clothing, and gender were identified (Cox & Catte, 2000; Marsh et al., 1991). Lastly, the respondents’ attitude towards the police was noted. The criteria used to code the data contained in the pictures is detailed below. Examples of the drawings are provided in appendices.

The data was then analyzed using a chi-square test. To test hypotheses 1-3, a chi-square test was run for each demographic factor. In these, the demographic factor was the independent variable, and the perception of the police was the dependent variable. All the other factors noted above were tested individually as independent variables. For Hypothesis 4, a chi-square test was run with the gender of the officer drawn by the respondent as the independent variable and perception of the police as the dependent variable. For Hypothesis 5, a chi-square test was run with respondents’ gender as the independent variable and the gender of the officer drawn by the respondents as the dependent variable.

When analyzing the relationship between appearance factors (e.g., presence of a gun in the picture, presence of a badge in the picture) and respondents’ perception of the police for Hypothesis 6, a chi-square test was run for each appearance factor. In each of those tests, the appearance factor was the independent variable and perception of the police was the dependent variable.

**Demographic Data of Respondents**

The race, age, and gender of respondents was coded based on their responses at the bottom of the form used. Responses for race were coded as White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, or other. Responses for gender were coded as male or female. Responses for age were coded as younger than 30 years old, or 30 years old or older. This binary method of operationalizing age was necessitated by the lack of age diversity among our respondents (college students). While analyzing age in more distinct brackets (e.g., 20-29, 30-39, 40-49) would perhaps be more informative, there were too few respondents in certain age brackets to make such a statistical analysis meaningful.

**Perception of the Police**

Respondents’ perception of the police was coded through the facial expression of the officer drawn. Pictures with a smiling officer (Figures 1 & 2) were deemed to be indicative of positive perceptions of the police, as it is assumed that a smile can reflect happiness of the drawn figure as perceived by the participant (Bonoti & Misalidi, 2015). Pictures with a frowning officer (Figure 3) were deemed to be indicative of negative perceptions of the police. Pictures with an officer whose facial expression was neither smiling nor frowning were deemed to have a neutral perception of the police (Figures 4 & 5). If no facial expression was drawn, that data was treated as missing (Figure 6). In total, 239 respondents (54%) drew an officer with a smile, 128 respondents (29%)
drew an officer with a neutral facial expression, 37 respondents (8%) drew an officer with a frown, and 39 respondents (9%) did not include a facial expression.

Gender of the Officer

The gender of the officer in the drawing was coded as female or male based primarily on the hairstyle of the officer drawn. If the drawing of the officer had long hair (Figure 7), hair in a bun (Figure 8), or hair in curls (Figure 2), the drawing was coded as female. Additionally, drawings in which the respondent labeled the officer as female were also coded as female. Drawings in which the officer did not have one of the hairstyles mentioned above were coded as male, as were pictures where the respondent labeled the officer as male. In some instances, respondents drew multiple officers. In instances where one of the officers drawn met the criteria for being coded as female and the other fit the criteria for being coded as male, the picture was coded as “both” (Figure 9). In instances in which the hair style of the officer drawn was indiscernible (Figure 3), the data were treated as missing. In instances where an object was drawn instead of an officer (Figures 10 & 11), the data were also treated as missing.

Appearance

For appearance, the presence or absence of various items in the drawing was noted. Those items were a gun, a donut, a car, a dog, handcuffs, a nightstick, sunglasses, facial hair, and a badge. Each item was coded as a separate variable.

Results

The results of the study show that Hypotheses 1, 4, 5, and 6 are supported by the data while Hypothesis 2 is not. The data for Hypothesis 3 is just outside the standard level of statistical significance used in the social sciences, and thus it would not technically support Hypothesis 3. However, given how close it is, it would be inaccurate to say it was refuted. Each hypothesis is discussed in more detail below.

Hypothesis 1: Race and Perception of Officer

The findings from this research support the hypothesis that there is a relationship between a respondent’s race and their perception of the police. A significant relationship \( p = 0.037 \) was found between the race of respondents and respondents’ attitudes towards the police. Among White respondents, 58% had favorable attitudes towards the police, and only 7% had negative attitudes towards the police. Among Black respondents, 40% had favorable attitudes towards the police, and 15% had negative attitudes towards the police. The number of Hispanic respondents was low \( N = 11 \), and three of those respondents did not include a facial expression that could be used to access their perceptions of the police. Accordingly, it was not possible to extrapolate a meaningful correlation for that group. Of the eight Hispanic respondents that drew facial expressions, three expressed positive perceptions of the police, and five expressed neutral perceptions of the police.

Hypothesis 2: Age and Perception of Police

Given the general demographic of university students, the number of older respondents is relatively small. Respondents were separated into two broad groups: those 30 years of age and older, and those younger than 30 years of age. Calculated this way, there is a significant relationship between the age of respondents and their perceptions of the police \( p = 0.009 \). However, the relationship does not support the majority of previous findings, nor what was hypothesized here. Past research has largely found that those who are young are more likely to have negative perceptions of the police, but the current results show that older respondents are more likely to have negative perceptions of police. For respondents who were 30 years of age or older, only 38% had favorable attitudes towards the police, compared to 56% of respondents under 30 years of age. As for negative attitudes towards the police, 19% of respondents 30 years of age and older expressed these, compared to just 7% of respondents under 30 years of age. It should be noted that the coding of respondents as older or younger than 30 years old may affect these results. If a different age was chosen to identify a group as “older,” these results may be different.

Hypothesis 3: Gender of Respondent and Perceptions of Police

The findings from this research support the hypothesis of a relationship between the gender of the participant and their perception of the police. The relationship found between gender and attitudes towards the police was just outside of the standard level of significance \( p = 0.067 \). Among women, 60% had favorable attitudes towards the police, compared to 48% of men. The difference between women and men in regards to negative attitudes towards the police is narrower. Among women, 7% had negative attitudes towards the police, compared to 10% of men. While a lack of statistical significance here is not consistent with the majority of past research, it is in line with at least one prior finding by Gainey and Payne (2009).
who found that the effect of gender is small and not significant.

**Hypothesis 4: Gender of Officer and Perception of Police**

A significant relationship \((p < 0.001)\) was found between perceptions of police officers and the gender of the police officer. For those who drew a male police officer, 58% of respondents had favorable perceptions of them, and just 10% had negative perceptions. For those who drew a female police officer, 72% had favorable perceptions of them. Not a single respondent expressed a negative perception of female officers. As noted in the findings for Hypothesis 3 above, women tend to have more favorable perceptions of the police than men. Accordingly, the fact that it was almost exclusively women who drew female officers in this research (as discussed in the findings for Hypothesis 5 below) likely has an impact on this finding.

**Hypothesis 5: Gender of Respondent and Gender of Officer**

When looking at the relationship between respondents’ gender and the gender of the officer drawn, there was a significant relationship \((p < 0.001)\). Indeed, of the 29 drawings received that depicted a female officer, 28 were drawn by female respondents, and the respondent who drew the one other female officer did not indicate their gender on the form provided. There were two male respondents that either drew both a male and a female officer in their picture or verbally indicated in their drawing that both males and females could be police officers. However, not a single male respondent drew only a female officer.

**Hypothesis 6: Appearance**

Of the list of items whose presence or absence was recorded (a gun, a donut, a car, a dog, handcuffs, a nightstick, sunglasses, facial hair, and a badge), four of those items had a significant relationship with respondents’ perceptions of the police: a badge, a gun, facial hair, and sunglasses.

**Badge**

Respondents were more likely to associate a badge with positive perceptions of the police. Of the respondents who drew a badge on their officer, 57% had positive perceptions of the police, compared to 11% who did not.

**Gun**

Of the respondents who included a gun in their drawing, 13% included a negative comment about the officer. Conversely, 41% of respondents who included a firearm included a positive comment. For respondents who did not include a gun, only 5% had negative perceptions of the police, while 61% had positive perceptions.

**Facial Hair**

Respondents were more likely to associate officer facial hair with negative perceptions of police. Of the respondents who drew facial hair on their officer, 47% had positive perceptions of police, while 11% had negative perceptions. For respondents who did not draw facial hair on their officer, 55% had positive perceptions of the police, while 8% had negative perceptions. The most pronounced contrast, however, appears when looking at respondents who had neutral perceptions of the police. Those respondents compose 42% of those who drew facial hair on their officer, compared to just 27% of those who did not.

**Sunglasses**

Continue The relationship found between the inclusion of sunglasses on the picture of the officer and perception of the police was just outside of the standard level of significance \((p = 0.066)\). Respondents were more likely to associate sunglasses with negative perceptions of the police. Of the respondents who drew sunglasses on their officer, 48% had positive perceptions of the police, while 10% had negative perceptions. For respondents who did not draw sunglasses on their officer, 55% had positive perceptions of the police, while 8% had negative perceptions. As with facial hair, the most pronounced contrast for sunglasses appears when looking at respondents who had neutral perceptions of the police. Those respondents compose 40% of those who drew facial hair on their officer, compared to just 27% of those who did not.

**Discussion**

The current study utilized an alternative method to analyze the public’s perception of the police. The purpose was to determine if human figure drawings would show similar patterns to the traditional method of measuring perception of police, or if we could learn more about public perceptions
through use of the alternative method. These initial results show that the use of drawings has provided additional findings that likely would not have been discovered through the use of a questionnaire. This includes the strong correlation between gender and the view of policing as a viable occupation for females and the relationship between various appearance factors (i.e., badges, guns, sunglasses, and facial hair) and perceptions of police.

The implications of the study are important and expand our knowledge of perception of police. These results support the different perceptions of police that are held by Whites and by members of minority groups. While the results of this study do not support earlier results of differences in perceptions of police held by older and younger respondents, this may be the result of the age categorization used in this study. In other words, because thus study was comprised of mostly college-aged students, the findings may not accurately reflect the true nature of police perceptions of older populations. Additionally, the current results show that female officers are perceived more positively than males and that female respondents are more likely to perceive that women can be officers.

The findings on appearance factors that influence attitudes towards the police can be instructive for law enforcement agencies. The association between the presence of a gun and negative attitudes of the police gives us some insight into what may be causing respondents to have negative attitudes of the police. Additionally, the association between facial hair and sunglasses and attitudes towards the police could inform policy regarding dress and appearance in law enforcement agencies. In short, these results could be used by police departments to improve their relations with the general community.

While the methodology used in this research did yield new and interesting findings, it is not without its constraints. In particular, the information being conveyed by respondents is limited by the artistic abilities of the respondents themselves. Many of the pictures drawn were simple stick figures. Some basic features were discernable, such as the facial expression and gender of the officers drawn. Other features that would have been worth knowing, such as the race of the officer being drawn, were in most instances undeterminable.

This is not to say that it is impossible to note the race of an officer via drawing. There were a few respondents in our sample that clearly noted the race of the officer, either through shading of the officer’s skin (Figure 5), a note written next to the officer indicating that the respondent drew the officer as a minority (Figure 12), or both (Figure 9). However, not every picture was as clear-cut. For example, one respondent used a different pen color (brown) for the face and hands of the officer than they used for the uniform, but it is not clear whether that was a decision was meant to denote the race of the officer, or whether brown was the only pen the respondent had. In another drawing, the respondent shaded the head of the officer, but the officer appeared to be a SWAT officer storming a house (Figure 13). Again, it is not clear whether the shading was intended to denote the race of the officer or whether it was intended to depict the mask that SWAT officers often wear. Even equating the shading of the skin of the officer with the race of that officer is problematic. It would require us to determine whether the lack of shading was a conscientious decision on the part of the respondent intended to denote the race of the officer or reflective of something else entirely, such as lack of artistic ability.

Additionally, it was not always possible to determine what some respondents’ attitudes were towards the police from the drawing. For example, two respondents drew a picture of a dog, one including the caption “Animals help too!” (Figure 14). While we could surmise the respondents’ attitudes towards canines, we have no definite indication of what the respondents’ attitudes are towards the police. Another respondent simply drew a donut (Figure 10). From this alone, there is no indication of what the respondent’s attitude is towards police.

Using standardized criteria to code the data was beneficial in that it increased the validity of the research (Joiner & Schmidt, 1997; Schock & Harrison, 1998). Using facial expression to determine the respondent’s perceptions of the police and hair style to determine the gender of the officer drawn appear to be viable ways to measure these variables. However, they are by no means perfect measures of these variables. For example, one respondent drew a handgun with a flag protruding from the barrel, reading “Shoot 1st, Ask Later” (Figure 11). Given the message included in the drawing, the attitude of the respondent towards the police would likely be interpreted as negative.

The same problem was encountered with respondents who drew only a picture of a pig. Not all of these pigs had facial expressions (Figure 15), leaving us to treat the data as missing even though we may have been able to surmise a respondent’s attitude towards police based on the “pig” reference. Even more problematic were the pictures of pigs with a smile (Figure 16). Using our coding scheme, the smile would denote positive attitudes towards police, despite the “pig” reference.

Similarly, there were many respondents who drew a picture that would seem to clearly express negative attitudes towards police, though the police officer was smiling or had a neutral facial expression.
In one picture, the cop was drawn saying, “I hate minorities but love donuts” (Figure 17). Other such pictures had similar messages. One included a suspect saying, “Please don’t shoot” and the words “unarmed black man” written underneath the suspect (Figure 18).

Others went even further. One respondent drew a cop with no discernable facial expression and a pig nose. The cop says, “He’s got a gun,” and shows a suspect in a pool of blood holding a bag of Skittles (Figure 19). Another respondent drew a cop with a neutral facial expression, wearing Kevlar and a face shield, and holding a Glock (the gun and armor items were labelled by respondent). The cop says, “I feared for my life!” and a suspect is on the ground (supposedly dead) with hands cuffed (Figure 4). With these drawings, our operationalization scheme would denote that the respondents had positive or neutral attitudes towards the police despite evidence in their drawings to the contrary.

While taking the entire drawing into consideration when determining a respondent’s attitude towards the police seems like a possible fix to this problem, the risk of interpretation bias inherent in such a coding scheme could taint the validity of the research (Cerdan, 2017; Peterson & Hardin, 1997). As noted above in relation to the drawings of dogs and the drawing of a donut (Figures 10 and 14), it may not be possible to definitively determine a respondent’s perception of the police, and different researchers may interpret the same drawing differently (Peterson & Hardin, 1997). With some drawings, a respondent’s expressed attitude towards the police appears to be more nuanced than a simple designation of positive, negative, or neutral. For example, one respondent drew a picture of a smiling cop, with the officer saying “Why couldn’t I have been a firefighter?” (Figure 20). The drawing includes a caption at the top reading “Firefighting is more fun.” We can deduce how the respondent feels about policing in relation to firefighting, but that does not necessarily mean the respondent harbors a negative attitude towards the police.

Two respondents drew pictures that seemed to express both positive and negative attitudes towards the police. One showed a cop (neutral facial expression) making an arrest, then later smiling while giving candy to a child. The picture makes clear that it is the same officer in both these scenarios by connecting both pictures with a line that says “same cop” (Figure 21). The other drew an officer with a line through him. On one side, the officer is smiling and holding a donut, with a heart symbol by his chest. On the other side, the officer is frowning and holding a gun, with a badge by his chest. The officer on this side is also saying “oink oink” (Figure 22). The attitude expressed in these two pictures seem to indicate that officers can be viewed both positively and negatively, depending on the time.

Another drawing expressed a similar sentiment. The drawing depicts an officer shooting and killing an unarmed person (Figure 23). While the drawing itself appears to express negative perception of the police, there is a note written below the drawing that says “but not all.” The overall perception conveyed by the respondent appears to be that they have negative perceptions of some officers but perhaps positive or neutral perceptions of others. The information conveyed by these nuanced depictions of officers is interesting, though not easily coded into a traditional positive, negative, or neutral framework.

Using hair style to code a drawing of an officer as female is also not a perfect measure. While departmental policies likely mandate that male officers keep their hair relatively short, there are instances where a male officer could have long hair, such as a male officer serving in an undercover capacity. Conversely, female officers can certainly have short hair. Indeed, there was at least one picture where the officer drawn had a short hair style, though it seemed possible the respondent intended to draw the picture as a female (Figure 1). As with coding perceptions of the police, using standardized criteria is important to maintain the validity of the research. Thus, while hair style is not a perfect measure, it appears to be a viable measure.

There are some respondent characteristics that were not included in the study that have been shown to affect perception of police. These include neighborhood context (Reisig & Parks, 2000; Weitzer, 2000), city of residence (Afon & Badiora, 2016; Bridenball & Jesilow, 2008; Taylor et al., 2001), previous contact with police (Weitzer & Tuch, 2002), and socioeconomic status/income (Weitzer & Tuch, 1999; Wu et al., 2009). These factors could be collected as part of future demographic characteristics of respondents. When gauging perceptions of policing as a viable occupation for females, feminist orientation has been found to be a significant factor (Haba et al., 2009), and at least one picture in this study potentially corroborates that (Figure 7). Incorporating these variables in future drawing-based research on perception of police could be beneficial.

Some of the findings from this research are limited by the nature of the sample used. Because the sampled population was composed of university students, the ages of the respondents were more homogenous than would be ideal. The generalizability of these findings are therefore limited, and additional analyses with a larger, more diverse sample is needed. Additionally, while the sample in the current research had a sufficient number of White and Black
respondents, it was lacking in representation of Hispanic populations. Replicating this research with a sample that included respondents with a broader spectrum of ages and racial makeup would be beneficial. Also, it would also be beneficial for future research to use samples from different locations in the United States and among different (non-student) populations.

**Conclusion**

The public’s assessment of law enforcement is of great consequence to officers and administrators. It is critical that we understand the factors that affect police perception. Having respondents provide their perception of police through a drawing rather than a questionnaire is one way to augment our understanding of those factors. This information can be utilized by police agencies to improve the public’s perception of them, which, in turn, can improve police-community relations and law enforcement’s ability to perform their job. In the case of demographic factors affecting public perceptions, police agencies can use this information to determine with which populations they need to take efforts to improve relations. In the case of appearance factors, police agencies can use this information to shape appearance policies as a means of improving community relations.

Use of the “draw a person” method in determining perceptions of the police, offers a method to learning more about what factors affect perception. Continued and expanded use of this method could yield even more discoveries and additional beneficial information on this topic.

**References**


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