People Perception of Police Behaviour: A Socio-Psychological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present study intends to understand the perception of people towards police behaviour, the psychological reasons behind the resultant police behaviour and how to tackle those mediating psychological variable that can enhance effectiveness in police behaviour.

Words: Police behaviour, perception, self esteem, achievement motivation, alienation, corrosive environment, employee engagement

It is a theoretical paper

Understanding perception of people towards police behavior is significant as tit can boost the confidence of people towards police that is reflected in reporting cases, criminal behaviors at the same time morale of police staffs will be boosted. It will contribute towards enhancing the image of police. In this regard, few questions were asked to the public like: "How satisfied are you with the police performance?" The respondents reacted differently. To mention few reactions about police, 'Do not ask me anything about police behaviour, I do not want to talk', 'Are you coming from police station, what happened?', 'I do not want to enter into the clutch of police, that's why, I did not tell anything'. Immediately one can infer that people are afraid of police. To understand the attitudes towards the police and the need for improvement/changes in police policies, it is necessary to examine the reasons behind the negative perception of police.

Let's look at few cases of police behavior like; Gujurt Riot, Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, series of communal riots in 2016. etc. These are few cases that have affected perception of people toward police behavior negatively. It is also observed that "if respondents judge that police use of force is excessive then significantly it has negative effect on their perception performance. The effect of this observation remained significant even after controlling socio-demographic, experiential and neighborhood characteristics" (Soo Son, Tsang, Rome and Davis, 1997).

It is quite understandable, public distrust of people may affect police ability to control crime. If people are dissatisfied with police behavior it will be reflected in their effort to provide genuine information to police. In turn, it contributes to a cycle of police reduced effectiveness, increased crime and further distrust of police. Decker (1981) provided an analysis of the effect the individual variables (minority

community, socioeconomic status, etc) and contextual variables (e.g., crime rates, victimization, etc.) that influence people's attitude towards police.

Individual- level Variables-

1. The effects of **minority community-** In a study conducted by Vibhuti Narain Rai (2008), former inspector general of the Border Security Force (BSF), on police neutrality during communal riots. He found that "the relationship between the police and Muslim citizens in most parts of the country was "inimical" and that "community perception of the police in situations of communal tension was that of an enemy."

2. The **effects of socioeconomic status**- Researches have shown that persons in the lower socioeconomic tiers hold more negative attitudes toward the police than the wealthy (Cao *et al.*, 1996; Murty *et al.*, 1990).

3. The **effects of experience with the police**- Researches have indicated that positive contact with the police improves perceptions of the police, while negative contact has the opposite effect (Worrall, 1999). Cheurprakobkit (2000, p. 332) reported that citizens who initiated contact with the police "viewed police as more favorable than those whose contact was initiated by the police". Studies shows that crime victims who are satisfied with the officers' handling of the incident rate the police more favorably than dissatisfied victims (Reisig and Chandek, 2001; Stephens and Sinden, 2000).

4. The effects of age- Studies indicate that younger persons view the police less favorably than older persons. Few exceptions also observed (Chermak *et al.*, 2001; Cheurprakobkit, 2000; Murty *et al.*,1990, Yagil, 1998). "Young respondents think police behaves more aggressively with crime" (Hindelang, 1974, p. 106). In turn, they are likely to be "dissatisfied with the treatment afforded them by the police" (Weitzer, 1999, p. 839).

5. The effects of gender- There is no consensus about the effects of gender. Cao *et al.* (1996), Jefferis *et al.* (1997, p. 389) reported that "males are somewhat more likely than females to believe that the police use too much force". Brown and Coulter (1983), Correia *et al.* (1996) found just the opposite Moreover, numerous studies indicate that gender has no effect on perceptions of the police (Benedict *et al.*, 2000; Murty *et al*., 1990).

6. The effects of education- Researchers observed that "wealthy and well-educated persons view the police less favorably than those with lower incomes and less education" (Murphy and Worrall, 1999, p. 339).

Contextual- level Variables

1. The **effects of victimization and fear of victimization**- Cao *et al.* (1996, p. 12) found that "fear of crime" and "recent victimization experiences" are significant variables that changes the perception and attitudes of public towards police whereas demographic variables are not so significant (Priest and

Carter,1999). In another study, no difference was found between attitudes toward the police held by respondents who had and had not been victimized (Smith and Hawkins,1973).

2. The **effects of residence (neighborhood and rural/urban safety***)* – Various researches have included "neighbourhood" as one of the variable and tried to understand its effect on perception of people (Cao *et al.*, 1996; Jesilow and Meyer, 2001; Murty *et al.*, 1990). Studies also show that "residents of rural communities and small towns view the police more negatively than residents of large cities" (Zamble and Annesley, 1987), on the other hand contradictory findings have been recorded (Worrall, 1999).No correlation was found between neighborhood and evaluation of the police (Webb and Marshall,1995).

3. Observation of police use of excessive force – Soo Son, Tsang, Rome and Davis (1997) observed that among those who had observed police use of excessive force, the probability of expressing dissatisfaction with police performance ranged from 0.10 among females who perceived their neighborhood as safe and had had no negative face-to-face interaction with a police officer to 0.88 among males who perceived their neighborhood as unsafe and had had a negative interaction with an officer. The probability of expressing dissatisfaction was uniformly lower among respondents who had not observed police use of excessive force". We can conclude, those who have seen the use of excessive force are more likely to express dissatisfaction with police performance.

Decker (1981), was of the view that police are one public-sector organization that needs the cooperation of people for its effective operation. It is critically important for the police to maintain a positive image among citizens.

A Socio-Psychological Analysis of Police Behaviour

The question arises, whether police is what people perceive, or police is what police perceive about themselves. Why there is a gap in this perception and what can be done to bridge the gap. Sunahara, 2002) has presented a model to explain the factors that lead to "unprofessional and unethical behavior" of police.

The Model

This model emphasizes three important variables, viz., corrosive work environment, police subculture/sense of loyalty and motivated workforce as input variable. The mediated by psychological variables such as emotions, alienation, stereotyping and sense of entitlement/heroic self image. These internal psychological changes in turn, shape our behavior (Sunahara, 2002). The model presented below:
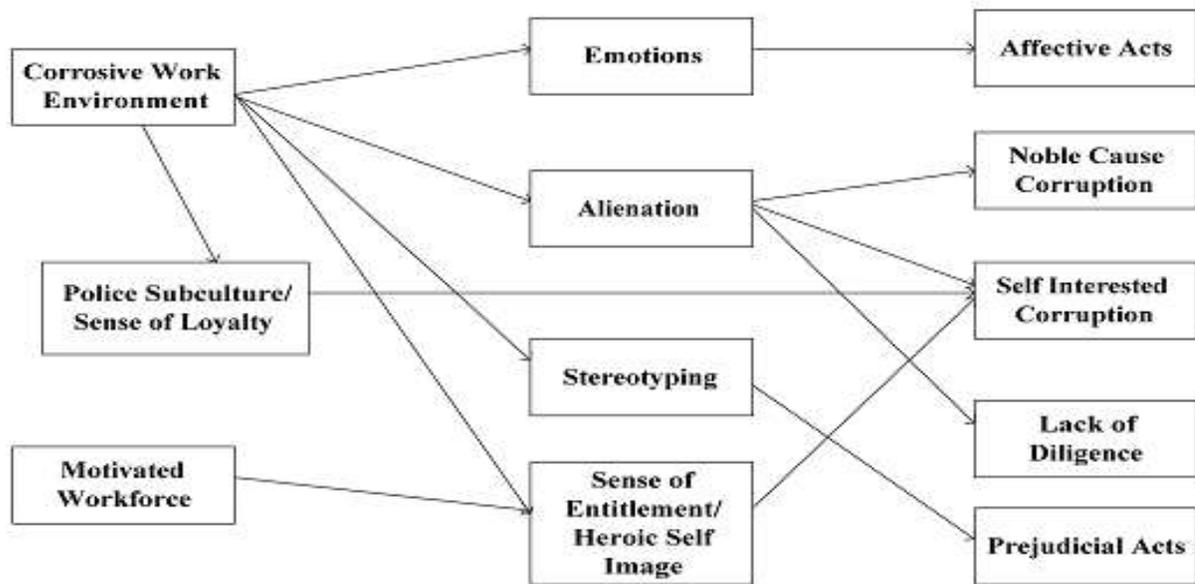
Figure 1
A Social-Psychological Model of Unethical
and Unprofessional Police Behaviour

(Adopted from Sunahara, 2002)

The above model depicts the hypothesized causal linkages that connect the police environment, culture and idealism of police officers to unethical and unprofessional police behavior (Sunahara, 2002).

Corrosive Environment- refers to hostile environment (both internal/organizational as well as external/street experiences). The stressors for the police while operation in this type of environment a are complex rules, personalities, labour-management conflict, intrusive organizational practices, etc. Liberman et al. (2002) observed that "stressors that are coming from within police services correlated more strongly with post traumatic stress symptoms than did exposure to operational risks". One of such significant stressors originating inside the organization is relationships with colleagues and management and shift work. These stressors have significant impacts on police behavior which is organizational in nature.

The outcome that we see that come out of corrosive environment affects emotions leading to **affective acts** - the wrongful actions triggered by anger, fear and frustration. For example, overly aggressive behavior exhibited during and following high speed operations. It can cause officers to redefine their relationship with their employers and the larger community in the form of police cynicism or **alienation**. It can make the police officer not to be loyal to the rules and organization as he/she does not see future hopeful and bright for him/her. This leads to behavior like noble cause of corruption, self interested corruption and lack of diligence. **Self-interested corruption** is actions which deprive a

member of the general public or the public as a whole of some material good. The behavioural expressions of self interested corruption are careless record keeping, tardiness, poor deportment, neglect of duty etc. A **failure to be diligent** is another type of behavioural expression of corrosive environment. Repeated exposure to groups (like, minority community, wealthy people ethnicity religion,) can lead to the development of **stereotypes**. This stereotype leads to discrimination and prejudicial acts. For example, discriminating behavior on the basis of race, sexual harassment, disrespectful treatment to poor, etc.

Police Subculture/Sense of Loyalty- Loyalty, as discussed from the point of view of police subculture is neither a virtue nor a vice (Sunahara, 2002). When value of loyalty assigned is situational, it brings subjectivity in interpretation. This subculture leads to unprofessional behaviour like self interested corruption.

Motivated Workforce- is one of policing greatest strengths and ironically one of its greatest vulnerabilities for police officers. Those who choose policing as a career, more than most, value public service. They are motivated by the desire to do well, to contribute and build a heroic self image. Sometime it leads to self interested corruption

The above figure highlights that police officers are unethical and unprofessional and the situation makes them to be so. Now we can raise a question here that – Is police officers' really unethical and unprofessional? If so, then what initiative can be taken to change police attitude towards their way of handling issues? Second area of question is, what people perceive is correct? In a sense, people expectation about police working is too high and they do not know the limitation of police activity? Is it that what people expectation from police is imaginary and it can never be achieved? If the negative perception of people about police is due to mental gap then we have to understand then what is nature of gap and how to bridge the gap? If we will analyze the stress that police is undergoing, it may give us better insight into the reality. Policing is claimed, to be a high stress occupation (Pilotto *et al*., 1994). They suppress their emotions and that leads to more stress. The consequences of failing to cope with significant stresses are serious and many a times leads to excessive use of force that leads to negative perception of people about police. Now the question comes, is it that the police are controlled by the circumstances, or they can control the circumstances? People expect in serious offenses police should be strict but not in minor issues. Here we have to find out what police should do is decided by people or decided by rules governing police force or decided by particular police officer in operation. All these questions influence people perception about police.

The Role of Socio-Psychological mediating factors in enhancing effective Police behaviour

In the above model, we have seen the mediating psychological factors are **emotions, alienation; stereotyping and sense of entitlement/ heroic self image** are giving rise to various outcomes in behaviour namely affective acts, noble cause corruption, self interested corruption, lack of diligence and prejudicial acts. This paper attempts focus on working on mediating psychological factors that can lead to effective police behaviour.

➢ **Enhancing Self Esteem of individual Police man.** Self-esteem is important because of its power in protecting and enhancing a person's feelings of self-worth and value. It is also important because it is a fundamental human motive that measures one's experience and quality of life (Knightley & Whitelock, 2007; Lane, Lane, & Kyprianu, 2004; Pepi, Faria, & Alesi, 2006; Rosenberg, Schoenbach, Schooler, & Rosenberg, 1995; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989; Ross & Broh, 2000). It significantly influences performance of the person. It is better that each police man is supposed to be aware of his/her self worth and value. This boosts the self confidence in him/her to take decision, think properly. Workshops need to be conducted in order to give a correct self image.

➢ **Role of Achievement Motivation on Police Performance**
Motivation is basically a state that causes people to behave in a particular manner in order to achieve a specific goal or purpose (Rout & Pathak, 2017). It provides an important foundation to complete cognitive behavior, such as planning, organization, decision-making, learning, and assessments (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Therefore, it can be understood as 'goal directed' behaviour (Lawler. 1994). It is a psychological process that causes the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of behaviour (Pettinger, 1996). In the words of Dave and Anand (1979) "Achievement Motivation is a desire to do well relative to some standard of excellence." Colman, A.M. (2001) has defined achievement motivation as "a social form of motivation involving a competitive desire to meet standards of excellence". It focuses on finding satisfaction in difficult and challenging work. A study was conducted to understand the relationship among achievement motivation and academic performance of Under-Graduate students (Rout & Pathak, 2017). The findings of the study showed that there is a significant positive relationship between achievement motivation and academic performance. Interview with the students revealed search for excellence push them to achieve better academic performance (Rout & Pathak, 2017). Here it is important to understand what excellence in work is and how it can be achieved. Question is to what extent 'excellence' is different from **sense of entitlement/ heroic self image.** Excellence is the quality of being the best at something. Any work given one need to be best in performing the task using best possible resources at hand. The focus is on work quality not on self. It can be developed by setting benchmark against best work done in that specific field/area. Making the person to believe that he/she can do it, developing strategies to approach it, learning from the past mistake, not having the habit to limit oneself from exploring new ideas, work hard and focus on effort and performance.

➢ **Improving relationship with minorities and young people.** Why alienation happens within a police man triggered by corrosive environment? Can this alienation be turned into a friendly atmosphere? If programs can be designed to reach young people it can create better understanding of the situation from both sides. "Young people should be encouraged to learn about the police and question irrational concepts about them" (Frazier *et al.*, 1986).

➢ **Overcoming Communication barrier among the team members.** Communication is critical to effective conflict management. This can range from casual gatherings among employees who rarely meet otherwise, to formal processes where differences are identified and discussed (McShane & Glinow, 2005). By improving the opportunity, ability, and motivation to share information, employees develop less extreme perceptions of each other than if they rely on stereotypes and emotions (Rout & Omiko, 2007). Dialogue meetings can often help the

disputing parties discuss their differences. Through dialogue, participants learn about each other's mental models and fundamental assumptions (Fisher, Maltz, & Jaworski, 1999).

➢ **Regular assessment of perception of people about police behaviour.** Moreover, individual departments need to study how they are viewed by the public. Regular assessment of perception of people towards police needs to be conducted in every locality, community. It can be done after any incidence also. In this case, before and after assessment can give a light of correct perception and assessment of police behaviour. A dedicated force is required to conduct this survey and research in this regard.

➢ **Training of young recruits in appropriate problem-solving and emotion resolution strategies**

"Understanding conflict dynamics and analyzing the root causes of conflict is the only possible way to deal with this problem. Of course, each conflict is supposed to be handled in a special way with different mode" (Rout & Omiko, 2007)The need to identify and developing appropriate behavioral and personal **coping strategies** in police as a function of their day-to-day work. It is not advisable to wait for the major critical incident to happen then work on to manage the crisis. Police can conduct regular stress management workshops, organization health check up. It allows staffs to ventilate their emotions, problems in a more informal way. Action research programs can be conducted for police coping methods. "Increasing our understanding of how organizational factors and culture act as a matrix within which critical events are interpreted may prove to be an important advance on how to deal effectively with police reactions to the experience of violence and trauma on the job" (Chandek, 1999).

➢ **Building a culture rooted on TRUST.** Trust, can be defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control other party" (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman 1995: 712). It is the confident positive expectations about the conduct of another (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998). It can be handled through frequent and meaningful interaction, where individuals learn to feel comfortable and open in sharing their individual insights and concerns, where ideas and assumptions can be challenged without fear or risk of repercussion and where diversity of opinion is valued over commonality or compliance.(Rout,2014). The perception of fairness is another important element. As members observe day-to-day activity, they naturally form opinions about the fairness of any given situation. An action or situation that prompts members to perceive unfairness can directly affect their desire to contribute effort and support to the project team and its goals. The need for affiliation in building community is also essential (Rout, 2014). Co-workers can help build trusting relationships in several ways: clearly communicating the value each brings to the team, demonstrating commitment to meet team expectations and being thorough enough to catch and fix the problems that will inevitably come up from time to time (Rout, 2014).

➢ Equipping our police force **to think creatively to handle the situation** is another way of intervention (Rout 2016). Creativity can be understood as uniqueness of the individual, new way of solving problem that requires fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration and to generate new and dynamic ideas and solutions. In general, our brain is equipped to think in the way one is habituated. This makes one's approach to handle situation in a preconceived way. When the approach /strategy/solution to the problem becomes stereotype/predictable hence the

perception followed can be termed as biased. Our police training process need to imbibe in our police force to think creatively and enlighten their meta thinking process. This process of self regulation and application of general intelligence can boost the image of police force approach to handle situation (Rout, 2016).

➢ **Employee Engagement work programs** can be a better solution for police force. Employee engagement emphasizes on being psychologically present in particular moment and situations that will lead to involvement and commitment to the situation/job. It involves engaging oneself in work roles, people, situation, etc. It can be termed as 'personal engagement" (Alderfer, 1972). Engaged employees are observed to be passionate, put forth discretionary effort at work. It will help them to be more productive, innovative and commitment to the job will be more (Rout 2017). By being engaged in work, the psychological factors like emotions, alienation, and stereotyping can be reduced. *Employee engagement paradigm* is based on the assumption about human nature that is recognized as Theory X that emphasize that average human being has an inherent dislike for the work and will avoid work if he can. Since they dislike work, they need to be controlled, directed or threatened with punishment to perform effectively (Ibid, 33). Reck 2013) has devised a new Employee Engagement Formula. It is otherwise known as *new Leadership model* for engaging employees. It emphasized three different issues: (a) creating a *full-engagement culture* (b) by *hiring* only qualified people who mingle with the Company Culture. It needs to be supported by relevant training and sponsorship programs; and (c) *leading* people not by issuing orders. A leader can set example, provide support and make sure that healthy culture is maintained (Rout, 2017).

To conclude, Decker's (1981) conclusion that age, contact with the police, neighborhood and race have a significant impact on attitudes toward the police is supported by the review of more than 100 articles (Brown & Benedict, 2002). On the basis of the Psychological factors as explained by Sunahara, 2002, few measures have been suggested in this paper to have an positive impact on attitudes of people towards police. At the same time, it can boost the morale of each police man, thus the image of police as its effectiveness. Many times, police forces apply newer scientific technologies such as finger-printing and breathalyzer testing. They also implement new insight into understanding criminal behaviour and how to understand them and deal with them. Public are also not aware of police efforts in this regard. Overall, in order to change attitude of both sides (police towards people and people towards police) effort need to be made.

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