

Moral Contexts of Procedural (In)Justice Effects on Public Cooperation with Police: A Vignette Experimental Study

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Abstract

Evidence from correlational studies shows people do wish to cooperate with the police by volunteering information about crime to them. This cooperation, the evidence suggests, depends on experiences and perceptions of procedural justice during everyday interactions with the police. However, these studies have not examined procedural justice effects across different normative orders (for example, pro-police vs. anti-police). Nor do they specify the social relations between potential cooperators and criminal suspects (for example, strangers vs. family members). This chapter addresses these gaps using data from a vignette experimental study conducted in Accra (Ghana). The evidence shows procedural justice has the potential to overcome generalized normative orders that are hostile to cooperation with the police. However, we also find that procedural justice is weak at inducing cooperation against acquaintances and familial relations; its effects are limited to crime suspects with whom potential cooperators have no social relationships.

Key words: *Procedural justice; legitimacy; moral frameworks; cooperation; Ghana*

Introduction

Cooperation is a ‘unique and defining’ feature of human societies (Declerck et al., 2013). This does not mean cooperation can be taken for granted; we often find that there are individual, socio-cultural and political forces that govern acts of cooperation, sometimes pulling potential cooperators in conflicting directions. The uncertain, unpredictable and dynamic character of

¹ For helpful comments, I am grateful to Tony Bottoms and Matthew Muscat. I also thank Michael Reisig for comments on an initial draft of the survey instrument, and Akosua Adutwumwaa Adu-Poku for fieldwork assistance.

cooperation makes it a central problem for any society. As Wrong (1994: 36) views it, a trans-historical problem for every society concerns how to “secure [the] establishment of cooperative social relations making possible the pursuit of collective goals.” A central collective goal for any society— and a staple topic for criminological research – is social order. The criminologist’s interest in social order concerns understanding its nature, the conditions that make or unmake this order, the producers and protectors, and the state of the rule of law, human rights and social justice under different forms of social order. Of particular interest for us in this chapter is the “criminology of prosociality” (Tankebe, 2019) which concerns the processes of people’s actual or intended cooperation with the police to reproduce social order. In the present paper, cooperation refers to a voluntary decision by a third-party to supply the police with information – what Black (1973) calls ‘legal intelligence’ – to help resolve a suspected crime.

The question of why people cooperate with the police can be explored through multiple perspectives, including rational choice, deterrence and collective action (see Tankebe, 2019). However, legitimacy remains the dominant framework through which the question is broached in criminology. Described as ‘elusive’ (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012), legitimacy refers to power that is recognised by relevant parties as rightful (Beetham, 2013). In the context of criminal justice, Bottoms and Tankebe (2020) posit a ‘structure of legitimacy’ comprising normally, but not invariably, four elements: perceived lawfulness of authority, distributive justice, effective use of authority, and procedural justice. The research on the legitimacy-cooperation nexus has focused particularly on the role of procedural justice, defined as the fairness of processes used in making decisions (Tyler, 2011). Based on evidence from a series of survey-based studies, Tyler concluded that judgments about procedural justice—defined as encompassing quality of decision-making and

quality of interpersonal treatment—shape people’s willingness to cooperate with the police (e.g. Hamm et al., 2017; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003).

The study discussed in the present chapter aims to extend the literature in two ways. First, it investigates whether the effects of procedural justice might vary across different moral contexts. Cooperation is a social action in the Weberian sense that its “subjective meaning takes account of the *behaviour of others* and it thereby oriented in its course” (Weber, 1978, p. 4, emphasis added). Procedural justice researchers have rightly drawn attention to how the behaviour of police officers can affect people’s cooperative intentions. In doing so, their primary focus remains the normativity of the ‘spot encounter’, and its wider consequences for people’s orientations to the law and to justice institutions (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2020). However, this focus overlooks the potential effects of the broader moral contexts of police-community interactions. Cooperation does not occur in a moral vacuum; nor is the moral context unidimensional. On the contrary, the background normative order can sometimes be *pro-police*, encouraging people to be co-producers of social order by supporting police agencies. In other cases, *anti-police* moral sentiments predominate, dissuading (even punishing) collaboration with the police. Consequently, it is important to explore how far different moral contexts might accentuate or attenuate the effects of procedural justice on cooperation; and indeed, whether procedural justice can overcome anti-police moral sentiments in a given community.

Second, we test whether the effects of procedural justice depend on the relational distance between potential cooperators and criminal suspects. It often happens that potential cooperators have some social relationship with suspected lawbreakers – for example, as acquaintances, friends, or relatives. These relationships might seem to impose normative obligations on individuals, the violation of which could attract physical or reputation harm. Yet, potential co-operators may also

have a generalized commitment to the State, with an attendant obligation to support efforts at reproducing social order. These competing normative obligations placed on potential co-operators can result in people feeling uncertain about cooperating or not with the police. Evidence from crime reporting shows that victims tend to resolve this conflict in favour of friends and kin relations (Gartner and Macmillan, 1995). However, until now, legitimacy researchers have not explored whether procedural justice effects persist even when potential cooperators are required to act against close relations to support the police.

In this chapter, we propose that applying these insights can further our understanding of how moral contexts and relational distances might shape the effects of procedural justice on people's intentions to cooperate with the police. We report results from an experimental vignette study assessing people's reactions to scenarios depicting either procedural justice, procedural injustice, or various situations of procedural justice vs. procedural injustice across moral contexts that encourage or discourage cooperation with the police. We also examine whether relational distances between potential cooperators and criminal suspects moderate willingness to cooperate with the police.

Procedural Justice and Public Cooperation

In *Why People Obey the Law*, Tyler (1990) drew a contrast between instrumental and normative perspectives on procedural justice. The former, he argues, prioritized the favourability of the outcomes received by a party to a dispute. Here, a procedure was fair to the extent that the decision was what a party preferred. Tyler criticizes the instrumental perspective for overlooking a significant terrain of the procedural justice topography uninhabited by outcomes. It is to this terrain that the normative perspective draws attention. According to this perspective, while a favourable

decision is important for people interacting with legal authorities, far more important is a concern with *how* decisions are made.

Four key elements of procedural justice, normatively conceived, are regularly identified and investigated (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Worden and McLean, 2017). First, people expect police officers to offer them an opportunity to be heard – they want some involvement in the decision-making process not so much as to control the process but to have their views heard and taken seriously. Second, people expect the police to keep an open-mind, and to avoid all forms of prejudice and bias. Third, people expect to be treated with respect and dignity. Respectful means different things to different people and in different situations. However, whatever its contextual formulations, people expect police officers to eschew actions or inactions that communicate disrespect toward them. Bottoms and Tankebe (2012, p. 145) describe this dimension as the “more personal” of the procedural justice elements, focused on “whether the decision-maker treats the subject in a true sense as a human being, with needs for dignity, privacy, respect for his or her moments of weakness, and so on.” Finally, people expect police officers to behave in ways that show care for the wellbeing of individuals or of the collective. Tyler (1990, p. 176) noted a temptation to belittle these concerns but that is only because we often overlooked the symbolic messages they communicate. As Tyler (1990, p. 176) put it, “... although politeness and concern for one's rights may seem like minor aspects of an interaction with a legal authority, they convey consideration information about status within the group.”

For many criminologists, the attraction of procedural justice transcends its status affirmation consequences. As students of the problems of social order, they have been concerned with the consequences of procedural justice evaluations for *compliance with laws* and *cooperative behaviors*, the latter referring to decisions by people to supply information about crime in their

local communities to the police (Tankebe 2013). This utilitarian approach to procedural justice has been criticized for downplaying its intrinsic value and for using people as a means to an end (Tankebe, 2009; Watson, 2020; Hough, 2021), while others say that the emphasis on process can detract from substantive justice, and hence threatens to impede progressive social change (Cohen, 1989; Fox, 1993). Yet, the utilitarian approach continues to dominate the literature. The evidence has come largely from cross-sectional correlational studies, and tends to show direct and indirect associations between procedural justice perceptions and cooperative intentions (Bolger and Walters, 2019; Tankebe et al., 2020).

However, as Nagin and Telep (2017) have argued, these designs fail to establish causal links. Hence, we cannot tell whether perceptions of procedural justice causally induce cooperative behaviours or intentions. A limited number of studies have sought to overcome this challenge by using experimental designs. Mazerolle and colleagues (2013) developed a script to mimic the elements of procedural justice for traffic officers in Queensland in Australia. Some officers were randomly assigned to use the script while others did not use the script. The results showed that motorists who interacted with officers using the script expressed greater willingness to obey traffic laws. Reisig and colleagues (2018) used data from a factorial design study to test the effects of procedural injustice on the legal intentions of undergraduate students in the United States. The vignettes administered to their student sample involved police-civilian interaction in traffic stops and in a noise complaints situation. Students who read procedurally just interactions expressed a greater inclination to accept police decisions and to comply with police directives. Maguire and colleagues (2017) asked a sample of 266 undergraduate students at two public universities in the United States to watch videos with different levels of procedural justice treatment of civilians. The findings showed procedural justice was causally associated with increased willingness to cooperate

with the police (see also Johnson et al., 2017). Similarly, Lowrey and colleagues (2016) analyzed data from a random assignment of students at a university in Washington DC to watch a video of a police traffic stop. Students who saw a procedurally just traffic stop were more likely than a control sample to express willingness to cooperate with the police.

These results are promising in that they all suggest a causal link between procedural justice and either legal compliance or willingness to co-operate with the police. However, Weisburd and Majmundar's recent review of the literature for the *National Academy of Sciences* (2018, p. 248) concludes that "the research base is currently insufficient to draw conclusions about whether procedurally just policing causally influences either perceived legitimacy or cooperation." The current study responds to this need for further experimental research by focusing on the causal links between procedural justice and willingness to cooperate with the police.

Moral Frameworks and Cooperation

The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that people act within "inescapable frameworks" (Taylor 1989); these frameworks allow them to make "strong evaluations," defined as a "background of distinctions between things which are recognised as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value" (Taylor, 1985, p. 3). In other words, with these frameworks, people can differentiate qualitatively that some actions are 'incomparably' right or wrong, better or worse, dignified or undignified, estimable or not. These frameworks are inescapable because they occupy a special status that commands people's respect and provides them with the lenses through which they determine where they stand on a range of moral questions. Abbey (2000, p. 34) observes that, for Taylor, these frameworks serve as moral maps in the sense that they:

... orient people in moral space... individuals feel themselves to exist within a space of moral questions about what is the right thing to do, what goods should be pursued and what is the right direction for their lives to take. Moral frameworks help them to answer these questions. Just as individuals orient themselves in physical space and find it hard to function if disorientated, so we orient ourselves in moral space: we usually have a sense of where we stand on moral questions and we feel ourselves as either moving towards or failing to move towards the goods in our lives.

Taylor's arguments have important implications for our study of cooperative behaviours. However, exploiting them requires us to begin with the recognition that, first, cooperation with police officers is a moral act: people have to decide, in particular situations, the rightness of supplying information to the police. When confronted with a cooperative opportunity, people must choose through their particular frameworks what is morally appropriate course of action. Second, located in people's frameworks are different commitments of varying strengths and consequences (Bottoms, 2022). These commitments place upon people moral demands and obligations, which can sometimes be experienced as "uncommonly deep, powerful and universal" (Taylor, 1989, p. 4). In the context of state-citizen interactions, a number of commitments can be identified, with demands of varying importance.

First, citizens may have generalised commitments to the state and its institutions. The state lays on citizens a set of demands and obligations, which they (sometimes) acknowledge due, in part, to a desire to live in a well-ordered and functioning society. A powerful demand by the state is for citizens to cooperate with criminal justice agencies to ensure social order, prevent injustice and impunity, and to strengthen human rights and the rule of law. The demand is powerful because it tends to be total, making no exceptions to this moral obligation. Consequently, the identity of criminal suspects, the location of a criminal act and the type of criminal behaviour should not modulate citizens' propensities to cooperate with the state and its institutions. In some

jurisdictions, there are laws that oblige employees and lawyers to report individuals suspected of involvement in money-laundering or terrorism financing (see *R v Da Silva* [2006] EWCA Crim 1654).

Second, and beyond the state, citizens sometimes may also have commitments to other generalized normative orders with their own distinctive demands and obligations. These obligations can be preferential or situational, and congruent or incongruent with those of the state. Thus, citizens may have commitments to *pro-police* normative orders, instilling in citizens a moral obligation always to support the work of the police by supplying them with information to solve crimes. Or, the local community's normative order can be *anti-police*, hence strongly antagonistic to any form of cooperation with the police. Thus, there is evidence of a strong culture in some communities against 'snitching', violation of which can result in physical and/or reputational harm (Natapoff, 2009; Rosenfeld, Jacobs and Wright, 2003). Consequently, when confronted with a cooperative opportunity, people will likely weigh between their generalised commitments to the state and the strong anti-police moral sentiments of their subgroup. Procedural justice scholarship suggests that the behaviour of the police can help swing the cooperation pendulum in favour of the state. Anti-police moral contexts are likely coterminous with contexts of low police legitimacy. Jackson and his colleagues report that perceived police legitimacy matters more for cooperation in such contexts than it does in contexts of high police legitimacy (Jackson et al., 2021).

Social anthropologists tell us that humans are not just *individuals*; they are *persons*, and, as persons, they are a "complex of social relationships" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, p. 5). Therefore, we can identify a third set of commitments within people's frameworks: commitments to kinship groups, friends, and acquaintances. Moral imperatives and sentiments here often require people to prioritise their allegiance and moral obligations to kin relations and friendships by avoiding acts defined within those relationship groups to be individually or collectively unworthy (Ekeh, 1975; Fortes, 1975). This is especially so in situations where bonds to the nation-state are much weaker

than those to kinship groups. Brennan and Pettit (2004, p. 94) argue that people try “within any domain to behave in an esteem-winning way or to locate their efforts in those domains of activity where they are most effective in attaining esteem.” The esteem that relatives, friends or acquaintances bestow on people can often outweigh what the state promises. Consequently, people will consider it “unthinkable to denounce to the police a relative, a neighbour, the relative of a friend, that is, someone with whom one has a personal tie, even a weak one: social disapproval would be too heavy” (de Sardan 1999, p. 30).

The question of the impact of relational distances on cooperation with criminal justice agencies is not foreign to criminology. It is a principal issue in Black’s (1976) theory of legal mobilisation. Among his five structural variables was morphology – the others being, stratification, culture, organization, and social control. Morphology refers to “the horizontal aspect of social life, the distribution of people in relation to one another, including their division of labour, networks of interaction, intimacy, and integration” (Black 1976, p. 37). Evidence from studies of crime reporting behaviours show such propinquity effects: victims are more likely to report crime to the police if the suspects are strangers than if they are relatives, friends or acquaintances (see Xie and Baumer, 2019).

However, tests of the morphological hypothesis are based primarily on data from crime victims rather than third-parties, which is the focus of research on public cooperation with the police. Applied to such a third-party cooperation with the police, Black’s theory predicts that potential co-operators will be reluctant to volunteer information about crimes that involve suspects with whom they have social relationships. This poses a challenge to the current approach to measuring cooperation, which asks people to indicate how likely they are to “call the police to report a crime occurring in your neighbourhood,” “call the police to report an accident,” “help the

police to find someone suspected of committing a crime,” or “call and give the police information to help the police solve a crime” (Sunshine and Tyler 2003, p. 541). In such surveys, when people do express cooperative intentions, it is never clear whether they interpret the *someone* as encompassing strangers, relatives, friends and acquaintances, or they equate that with strangers or other persons with whom they have weak social relations. Consistent with the evidence from victim crime reporting studies, we should expect cooperation to vary across relational distances.

Methods

Experimental vignette survey

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an experimental vignette study in which study participants were randomly assigned to read about a police interaction with varied degrees of procedural justice across different moral contexts. Vignettes are short descriptions of a person or a social situation which contain precise references to what are thought to be the most important factors in the decision-making or judgment-making processes (Alexander and Becker, 1978, p. 94). A vignette experimental design has ‘the ability to establish causal inference and isolate underlying mechanisms while using realistic contexts that alleviate potential concerns about external validity’ (Schilke & Rossman 2018, p. 1088). Consequently, they are used in studies of procedural justice effects on cooperative intentions (e.g. Reisig et al., 2018).

In our experimental vignettes, the participants were invited to participate in an academic project involving the reading of a short scenario and responding to a few questions about it. Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of six versions of a short story in which they imagined themselves having an interaction with the police on suspicion of having purchased a mobile phone stolen from a violent robbery. The first is a procedural-justice condition in which

the officer listens carefully to what the individual has to say and treats them with respect. The second is a procedural-injustice condition and involves the officer being abusive and disrespectful towards the individual, and refusing to listen to what they have to say. In the third vignette, the participant is asked to imagine themselves being treated procedurally justly but their reference group of friends and family disapproves of cooperation with the police ('anti-police moral context'); by contrast, the fourth vignette depicts procedural justice in a 'pro-police moral context' – that is, the participant's reference group encourages cooperation with the police. The fifth and sixth reflect procedural injustice in pro-police vs. anti-police moral contexts. The specific versions of the police interaction are available on requests.

After reading the vignette, participants answered a short survey, which measured the dependent variable – *willingness to cooperate with the police* – across contexts of varied relational distances: unspecified relation ('someone'); stranger; acquaintance; and relative. The exact wording of each is as follows, with responses anchored on a five-point scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely."

Unspecified relation: You heard in the news that police in the area where you live are looking for *someone* they suspect of robbery. Imagine that you have information about the suspect. How likely is it that you will give the information to the police?

Stranger: You heard in the news that police in the area where you live are looking for someone they suspect of robbery. Imagine that you have information about the suspect who is a *stranger* to you. How likely is it that you will give the information to the police?

Acquaintance: You heard in the news that police in the area where you live are looking for someone they suspect of robbery. Imagine that you have information about the suspect who is your *friend's relative*. How likely is it that you will give the information to the police?

Relative: You heard in the news that police in the area where you live are looking for someone they suspect of robbery. Imagine that you have information indicating that the suspect is your *relative*. How likely is it that you will give the information to the police?

Sample

The data for the study came from a household survey conducted in two Ghanaian communities of different socio-economic conditions. The two communities were Accra Newtown and Adabraka, respectively, categorized as low class and middle class (see Agyei- Mensah and Owusu 2010). Following sampling methods from prior research in Accra (Nivette and Akoensi 2019), principal streets in the study communities were first mapped to aid sampling. Random starting points were determined and each house was targeted for one experimental condition. Nearly all houses had multiple households for which a convenience sampling approach was used to choose participants to complete one condition. Four graduate students from the sociology and psychology departments of the University of Ghana administered the surveys face-to-face between 18 July and 2 August 2019.

Out of 509 participants selected, 422 completed the survey, representing a response rate of 82.9%. Of these, 55% were male and 45% female. Their ages ranged 18 to 84 years ($M = 33.9$ years, $SD = 13.29$). Most of the participants had attained either primary school education (14.3%) or secondary education (56.9%); 7.6% indicated professional education, and 21.2% reported having tertiary education (polytechnic or university). In terms of employment, 57.7% were in full-time and part-time employment, 21.6% were students or in apprenticeships, 6.9% were unemployed and 13.8% were retired or unable to work.

Results

Statistical *t*-tests

We begin by conducting a series of *t*-tests to explore the relative effects of procedural justice and injustice across the four domains of relational distances: an unspecified relation, a stranger, an acquaintance, and a relative. First, we consider differences in cooperative intentions when people are exposed to procedural justice conditions. We find no statistically significant differences in willingness to cooperate against stranger, as against where the suspect's status is unspecified, $t(141) = 1.26, p > 0.05$. However, in comparison with a familial relation, procedural justice had large effects cooperation against both strangers (Cohen's $d = 1.01$) and unspecified suspects (Cohen's $d = 0.82$). Further, procedural justice effects on cooperation were lower when the suspect was an acquaintance than when the suspect was a stranger, $t(141) = 4.81, p < 0.001$. Finally, we found no statistically significant difference in co-operation as between acquaintances and familial relations; in other words, our participants were equally predisposed against cooperation when the crime suspect was a relative or someone known to them.

Second, we compare procedural justice vs. procedural injustice for each of the relational domains. We begin at the focus of current experimental studies of procedural justice effects on cooperation: that is, cooperative situations involving an unspecified suspect ('someone'; see Figure 1). Consistent with the extant literature (e.g., Reisig et al., 2018; Mazerolle et al., 2013), we found that intentions to cooperate with the police were significantly greater among those exposed to a procedural justice vignette ($M = 3.03, SD = 1.16$) than those exposed to a procedural injustice vignette ($M = 1.67, SD = 1.55$), $t(139) = -5.92, p < 0.001$. The effect size, Cohen's d of 1.0, suggests a large difference between the two conditions. Similarly, we found a large (Cohen's $d = 0.94$) and statistically significant difference when the subject of cooperation was a stranger:

participants who read a procedural justice vignette ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.12$) were more willing to cooperate with the police than their counterparts who read an injustice interaction ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(138) = -5.57$, $p < 0.001$. When the crime suspect is an acquaintance, we find a moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.50$) and statistically significant difference in cooperation between procedural justice and procedural injustice conditions, $t(139) = -2.97$, $p < .01$. Finally, when a familial relation is the crime suspects, being treated procedurally justly again had a greater effect on cooperation than being treated unjustly. However, unlike the other relational contexts, the effect of procedural justice here was small, Cohen's $d = 0.38$.

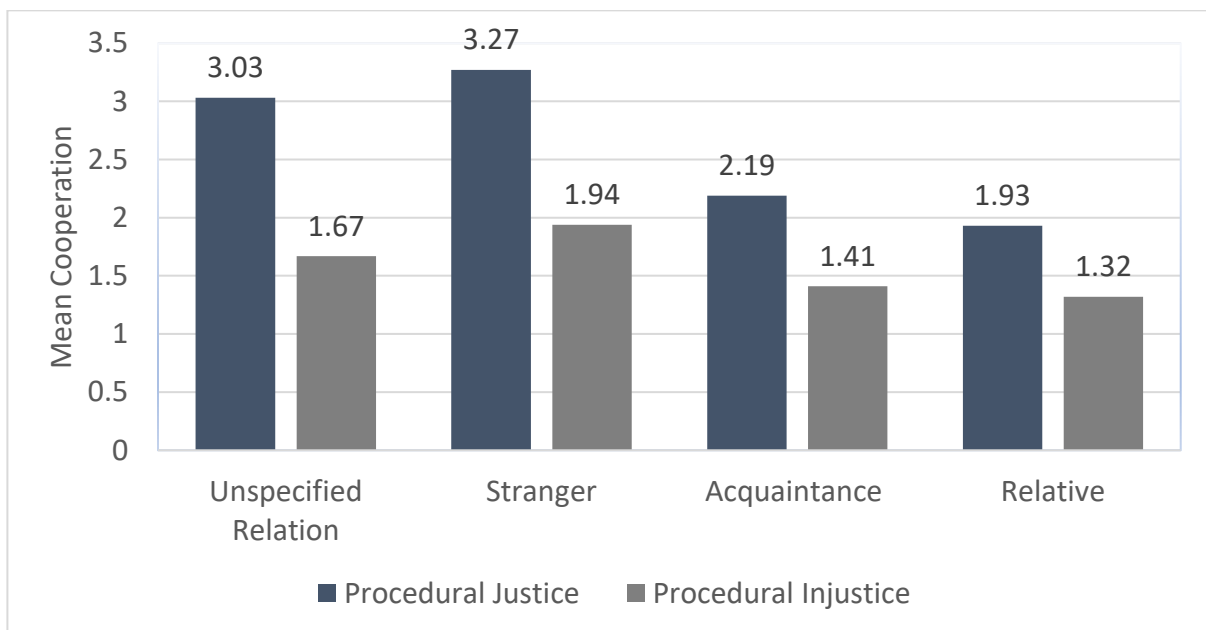


Figure 2.1: Mean Cooperation by Relational Distance

Figure 2 shows the mean scores for cooperation in relation to an unspecified suspect ('someone') across different experimental conditions. A number of interesting findings emerged. First, compared with participants in the procedural justice scenario ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.16$), being treated procedurally unjustly significantly lowers cooperation in all moral contexts. Second, contrary to the findings reported by Jackson and his colleagues (Jackson et al., 2021), procedural

justice effects are similar across moral contexts that are pro-police ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.119$) or anti-police as regards cooperation ($M = 2.96$), $t(137) = -1.04$, $p = .30$. The overall finding is therefore that being treated procedurally just is associated with an increased intention to cooperate against unspecified suspects irrespective of the moral contexts; by contrast, being treated unjustly suppresses cooperative intentions irrespective of the moral contexts.

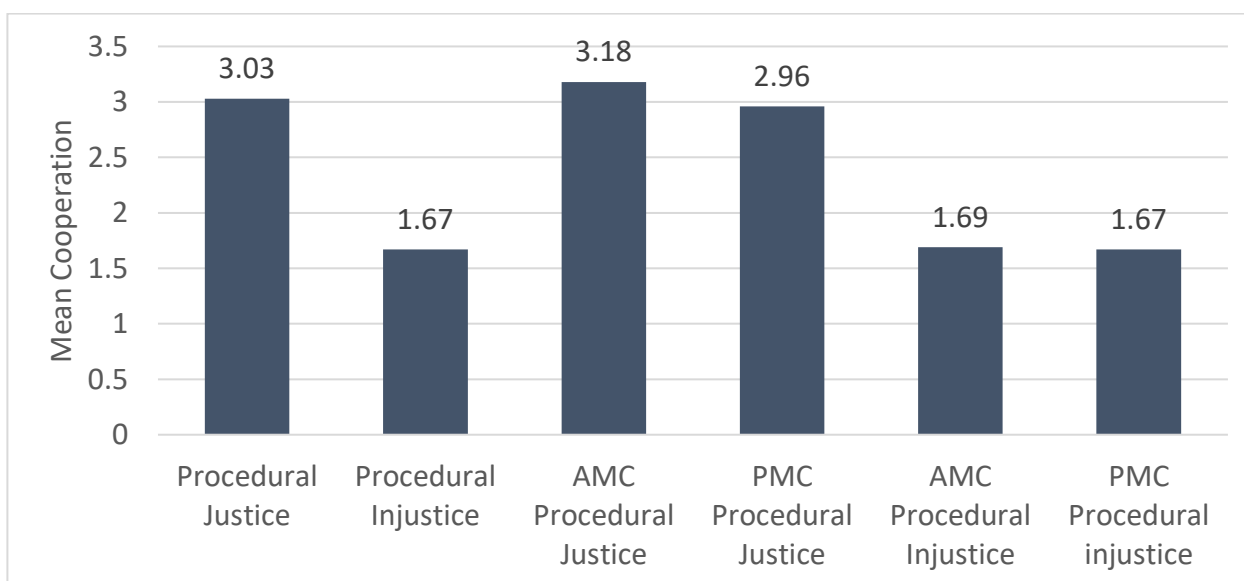


Figure 2.2: Cooperation against relationally unspecified suspects by moral contexts
 Note: Anti-police moral context, PMC = pro-police moral context

The findings for cooperation in relation to strangers are similar to those reported for unspecified suspects (Figure 2). Figure 3 shows that compared those in a procedural justice scenario ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.12$), being treated procedurally unjustly significantly lowers cooperation against strangers even in contexts that encourage cooperation with the police ($M = 2$, $SD = 1.55$), $t(139) = -5.58$, $p < 0.001$. The difference in cooperation intent is large (Cohen's $d = 0.94$). Second, experiencing procedural justice in an anti-police moral context ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.21$) causes greater willingness to cooperate against strangers than experiencing procedural

injustice in pro-police moral context, $t(139) = 5.47, p < 0.001$. In other words, even if there is a prevailing norm that sees cooperation against strangers as a fair game, how police treat citizens matters. The overall conclusion here is that cooperation has more to do with police behaviour than the nature of the prevailing moral norms about the police.

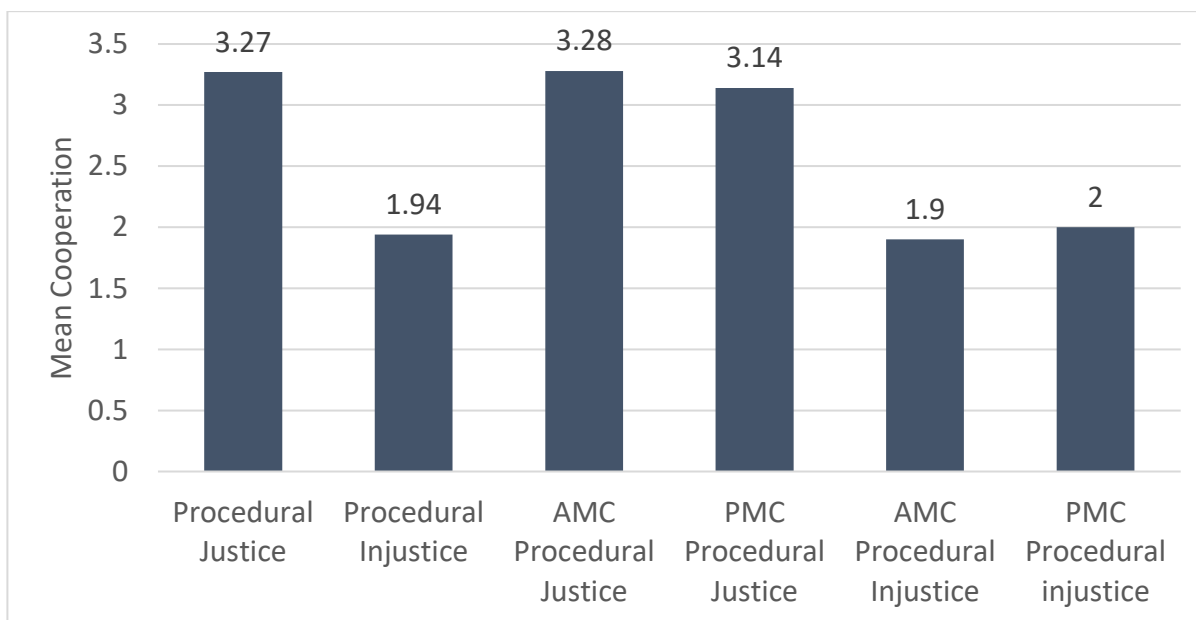


Figure 2.3: Cooperation against strangers by moral contexts.

Note: Anti-police moral context, PMC = pro-police moral context

Might the story change if the criminal suspect is an acquaintance of the potential cooperators? The data presented in Figure 4 align with the findings for strangers: fair treatment in an anti-police moral context ($M = 2.49, SD = 1.43$) causes greater intentions to co-operate in relation to suspects who are acquaintances than unjust treatment in a pro-police moral context ($M = 1.51, SD = 1.51$). The difference between the two contexts was moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.67$), suggesting a non-negligible difference between the two contexts.

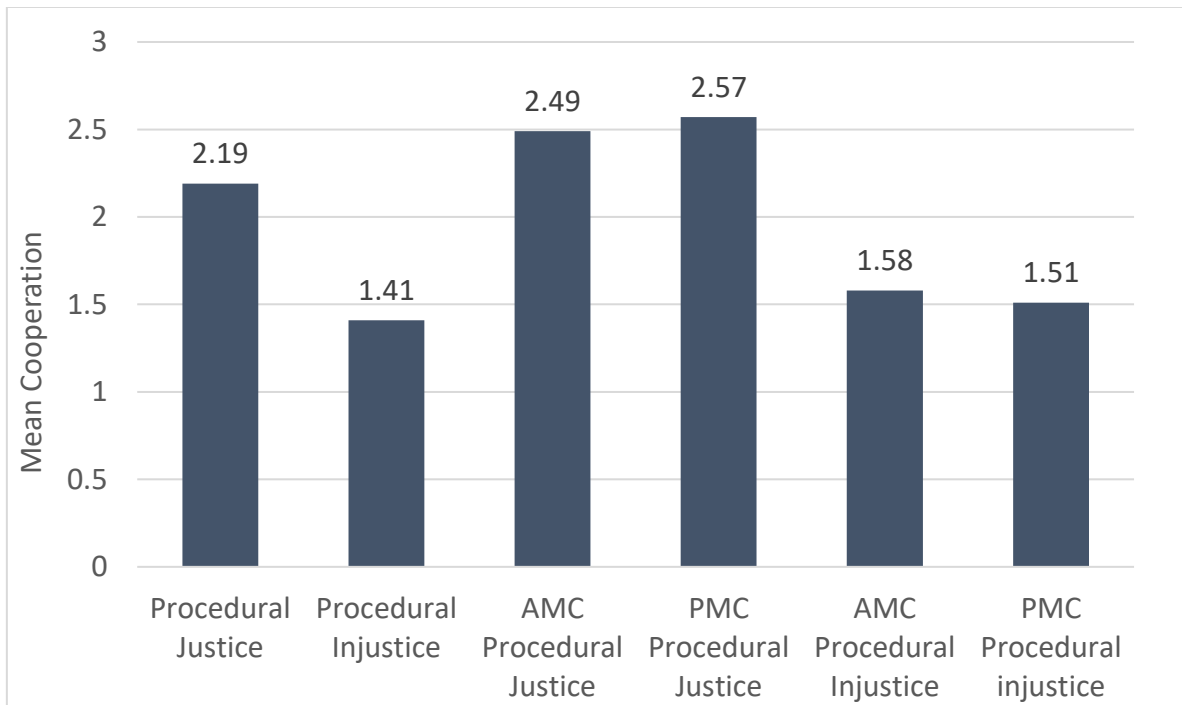


Figure 2.4: Cooperation against acquaintances by moral contexts.

Note: Anti-police moral context, PMC = pro-police moral context

Finally, we consider cooperation where the suspect is a familial relation (Figure 5). Whether the moral contexts are pro-police ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.50$) or anti-police ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.66$), procedural justice causes greater willingness to cooperate in relation to relatives than does procedural injustice even if that injustice occurs in a pro-police context ($M = 1.30$, $SD = 1.55$). Thus, as with strangers and acquaintances, procedural injustice suppresses cooperation in relation to relatives, irrespective of the moral context of policing.

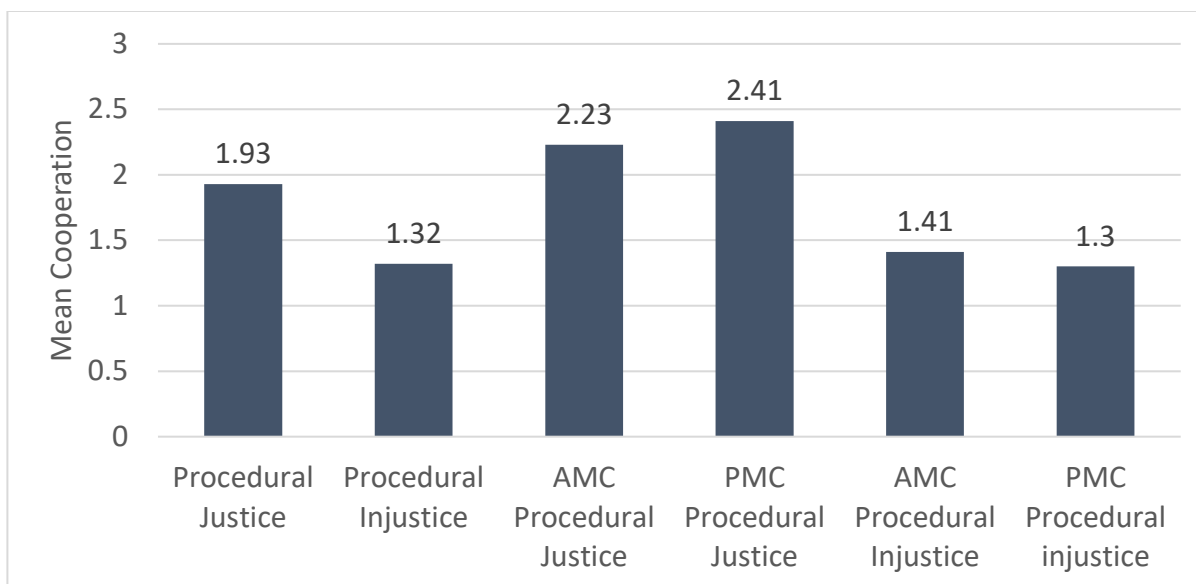


Figure 2.5: Cooperation against relatives by moral contexts.

Note: Anti-police moral context, PMC = pro-police moral context

Multivariate analysis

Table 1 presents the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses estimating the effects of experimental conditions on willingness to cooperate with the police across the three relational domains. Prior to estimating models to assess cooperation, we performed a series of model diagnostics to ensure that our model estimates were unbiased and efficient. In particular, we conducted multicollinearity diagnostics to ensure that there was no harmful multicollinearity in our analyses. The results of variance inflation factors (VIF) and condition indices indicated that collinearity was not problematic.

Two noteworthy findings emerged from the data. First, whether the suspect is of unspecified relation ($\beta = -0.33, p < 0.001$) or a stranger ($\beta = -0.32, p < 0.001$) an acquaintance ($\beta = -.19, p < 0.01$) or a relative ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.01$) participants who read a procedural injustice vignette were less likely than those who read a procedural justice vignette to say they would cooperate with the police. These findings held true even when the moral context of the injustice treatment was

one that favoured cooperation. Second, the models explained more of the variance in cooperation against strangers and unspecified relations than they did of cooperation against acquaintances and relatives. This suggests that procedural justice or injustice was a weak explanation for cooperation against criminal suspects known to potential cooperators.

TABLE 2.1 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

Three key findings emerged. First, following Taylor (1989), we argued that people often demonstrated a generalised commitment to the state and its institutions. They want a secure social order, and are therefore often predisposed to respond positively to police appeal for information. However, as the legitimacy literature shows, willingness to cooperate in specific situations is often contingent on the behaviour of the police. Thus, Tyler (2011) argues that everyday interactions with the police constitute a ‘teachable moment’ and a ‘socialising experience’ with implications that transcend particular interactions. When officers behave procedurally justly during interactions with civilians, they reinforce the generalised commitment to cooperate with the police; otherwise, they undermine that commitment and induce postures of hostility, defiance and non-cooperation. Consequently, we found that when the police demonstrated procedural justice, it caused a greater intention to cooperate with them; when they were seen as abusive and disrespectful, cooperation intentions were significantly lowered. Given that the research design was experimental, these findings add to the small number of existing studies that show a causal relationship between procedural justice and cooperation

Our second major finding concerns the moderating effects of different moral contexts. Researchers have documented an attitude described as legal cynicism – that is, “a cultural

orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety” (Kirk and Matsuda 2011, p. 1) – that discourages cooperation with the police. However, as Bell (2016) reports, residents of communities where such cynicism is prevalent often deploy various strategies that allow them to cooperate with the police. A notable such strategy is “officer exceptionalism” – here, people decouple individual officers from the police institutions, and cooperate on the basis of their positive experiences of such officers. Our findings support the Bell evidence: even when background norms are anti-police, people still express a willingness to cooperate if the behaviour of an individual officer is procedurally just; by contrast, if an officer acts procedurally unjustly, people are disinclined to cooperate even if the moral context encourages cooperation. Conversely, procedural injustice was found to suppress cooperation even when the moral context was pro-police. These findings suggest that procedural justice may be a viable strategy to overcome – or, at least, breach – some deep-seated anti-police normative orders.

Finally, the cultural anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (2014, p. 478) argues that there is a class of “commitments that people find so integral to who they are that they might not care to go on with their lives without them, or would not know themselves if they no longer had them. They include deeply cherished and self-defining ideals, activities, and personal associations.” These may include kinship networks, professional groups, and other social groupings. Thus, some people even commit ‘honor killings’ to protect the reputation of their families (Cooney, 2014; Eisner and Ghuneim, 2013). Brennan and Pettit’s (2004) work on the moral economy of esteem can shed some light here. They argue that, wherever we find them, people desire to be held in esteem and will, therefore, avoid conduct that potentially threatens their esteem within groups that matter to them. Brennan and Pettit (2004, p. 246) further argue that this desire for esteem can have the unintended malign effect of acting as “an intangible backhand [that] can lead those in a particular

group to earn credit with one another by behaving in a manner that is detrimental to the population at large or to other groups.” Failure to co-operate with the state against people with whom one has a relationship can be evaluated in this ‘backhand’ way. But a stranger – often seen as “the prototypical other, the alien outside the fence of custom, belief, and rule that marks the limits of the moral community and its members” (Fortes 1975, p. 250) – is fair game. Consequently, we find that the willingness of our Ghanaian research participants to cooperate with the police depends in part on their relational distance from criminal suspects: when the suspect is a stranger or of an unspecified relation to them, procedural justice induces significantly greater cooperative intentions than if the suspect is an acquaintance or a familial relation. This evidence suggests a *concentric circle of cooperation*, with familial relations at the centre, followed by acquaintances, and finally strangers at the periphery. At each stage out from the centre, the ability of procedural justice to promote cooperation increases. Stated differently, the relational proximity of the suspect is an important element in what Taylor (1989) calls people’s ‘moral frameworks’, and this proximity can therefore significantly affect co-operation or otherwise with the police.

Limitations and directions for future research

The present study is not without limitations. First, the data came from a survey of resident of one city in Ghana. How far the findings reported can be generalized to the rest of the country is difficult to say. Nor can it be said that these findings are necessarily generalizable to cities of other countries with socio-economic and political conditions that differ markedly from what pertains in the study site. Second, the study uses cross-sectional data to explore people’s moral frameworks shape the effects of procedural justice on cooperative intentions. However, these frameworks are not static; as Abbey (2000, p. 35) has noted, “moral frameworks can be adjusted to accommodate new strongly valued goods.” This raises an important question: how do changes in people’s

frameworks shape their cooperation with the police over time? Answering this question will require an analysis of longitudinal rather than cross-sectional data. Third, we did not specify the relationship between potential cooperators and the victim of the robbery case. It is, therefore, an open question as to whether the findings about propinquity effects will vary across different relational distances with victims. For example, what impact will procedural justice exhibit if potential cooperators have social relationships with victims and suspects? Future studies that address these limitations will advance our understanding of how moral contexts and relational proximities affect the hypothesised association between procedural justice and cooperation.

Despite these limitations, our findings show the promise of procedural justice to overcome generalized normative orders that are hostile to cooperation with the state to address threats to social order. Such normative orders often arise from experiences of state violence and illegitimacy (González, 2020; Epp et al., 2014). This is especially so in transitional societies and in contexts of state fragility. Our findings suggest that the behaviour of individual state actors can either reinforce or overcome cynicism against working with the state.

Policy implications

An important policy implication of the findings is that police managers can improve public support for policing by adopting procedural justice strategies. This can be achieved by training officers in procedural justice principles and developing mechanisms to track how officers handle interactions. Such training should focus on the ‘soft skills’ of explaining decisions, listening to what citizens have to say, acting with respect, avoiding partiality in decisions, and showing care for the wellbeing of citizens. However, training alone will fail unless some crucial conditions are met. One condition is willingness to change reward structures to link officers’ “opportunities for advancement, their compensation, and the respect that they have in the eyes of their leadership to

[...] procedurally just behaviour when on the street” (Tyler 2011, p. 262). This requires developing the capacity to track police-public interactions. Body-worn cameras provide a means to achieve such tracking objectives (see, McCluskey et al., 2019; Ariel, 2016). There is also evidence that police experiences of fair treatment within their organizations affect their commitments to procedural justice when they interact with citizens (Tankebe, 2014). This suggests that implementing a procedural justice strategy requires the training of supervisors and commanders to treat officers fairly.

The second policy implication arises from the conclusion that procedural justice is only minimally important to cooperation with the police against criminal suspects with whom one has close social relationships. We may expect a similar pattern of findings to emerge in such settings as domestic violence, honor-based homicides, organized crime, police misconduct, and nepotistic forms of corruption. There is already evidence, for example, as regards police officers developing a loyalty and a ‘code of silence’ that makes them disinclined to cooperate against their peers (Kutnjak Ivković, 2005; Long et al., 2013). The implication is that, as a policing strategy, procedural justice is more promising in generating ‘legal intelligence’ against strangers. It is unlikely to overcome social bonds between crime suspects and potential cooperators with the police. This conclusion does not mean police should pay less attention to procedural justice principles in such situations. Procedural justice is a normative issue before it is an instrument of crime prevention.

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Table 2.1: OLS Regression Analysis

	Unspecified Relation		Stranger		Acquaintance		Relative	
	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Procedural Injustice	-0.33***	0.23	-0.32***	0.24	-0.19**	0.25	-0.14*	0.27
PJ in Pro-police Moral Context	0.04	0.23	-0.00	0.24	0.07	0.25	0.07	0.26
PJ in Anti-police Moral Context	-0.02	0.23	-0.03	0.24	0.09	0.25	0.11	0.27
PI in Pro-police Moral Context	-0.33***	0.23	-0.33***	0.24	-0.15*	0.25	-0.12	0.26
PI in Anti-police Moral Context	-0.33***	0.23	-0.31***	0.24	-0.16**	0.25	-0.15*	0.26
F-statistic	21.79***		17.63***		8.44**		6.73***	
Adjusted R-square	19.80		16.50		8.10		6.40	
N	420		420		421		420	

Note: Procedural Justice condition is the reference category; *SE* = standard errors; PJ = procedural justice; PI = procedural injustice