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# *Attitudes and police visibility*

A study about youths' attitudes towards the Swedish police force

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## ***Abstract***

*The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between youths' attitudes towards the Swedish police force and police visibility. Two specific hypotheses were addressed in this study: (1) Police visibility affects youths' attitudes; (2) There are attitude differences between the genders. The data were obtained from a sample of 86 pupils (mean age 17,3) in an upper secondary school. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) and a Likert scale were used to determine youths' attitudes and how often they had seen the police for the past year. The results showed no significant correlation for either of the hypotheses but revealed however that youths had a moderate positive attitude towards the Swedish police force.*

*Keywords:* Swedish police force; youths; attitudes; police visibility; implicit association test

## ***Introduction***

During the last couple of years the interest in studying citizens' attitudes towards the police has increased to a new level (Smith, Frank & Novak, 2005; Brandl, Frank, Worden & Bynum, 1994). The purpose of these investigations was to explore and clarify factors related to how attitudes can affect citizens' willingness to help the police in crime prevention.

In recent years, research has shown that there is a valid correlation between attitudes towards the police and citizens' enthusiasm to aid the police in order to prevent crime (Vito, Walsh & Kunselman, 2005; Renaud & Batts, 2006; Scott, Duffee & Renauer, 2003).

A study by Hurst and Frank (2000) showed that most research which investigating attitudes towards the police focused on adults. The number of studies dealing with youths' attitudes towards the police from an international perspective is currently very low. Thus, from this point of view gaining insight into youths' attitudes towards the Swedish police force is relevant.

Thereby, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between youths' attitudes towards the Swedish police force and police visibility. Moreover, it is interesting to explore attitude differences between the genders.

## ***Previous research***

In order to understand how attitudes are shaped among youths, one has to understand the foundation of the social context in which they are shaped, that is social cognition. Baron and Byrne (1994) claimed that the basic foundation for which we use to receive and access information in our social world is cognition. Cognition involves the process through which we receive, organise and interpret information. In this sense, people often use strategies to help them shape their social world. This makes information processing work in a simplified way.

Moreover, Pennington (2000) argued that social cognition could be considered to be a sub-field of cognitive psychology. The difference between social cognition and cognitive psychology is that the former focuses on *internal* factors within an individual, i.e. mental relation, while the latter concentrates on *external* factors, i.e. understanding objects and other individuals. For example, police officers who patrol on foot in the city do not only observe

other people but they also are observed by others in the social context. It is possible in this sense that the way police officers patrol, whether it is on foot or by car, could have an impact on youths' attitudes towards the police. Thus, police visibility is considered to have an active role in shaping our attitudes (Salmi, Voeten & Keskinen, 2000).

Baron and Byrne (1994) found that our behaviour, attitudes and thoughts are, among other things, regulated by the social perception. Our first impression of the police may broadly create a mental representation of the police. This in turn will influence our future perception of the police, whether it is through an actual experience, the media or what we have been told by others about the police. As a police officer one is a part of a whole; when a part suffers, the whole suffers. One suggested explanation for this negative evaluation of the police is partly due to the fact that social perception is often linked with stereotypes (Pennington, 2000).

Johnson (2001) pointed out that the police uniform elicits stereotypes. The purpose of the uniform is to recognize and represent the power vested in a person from the state. In this sense, if a police officer makes a mistake, not only will the police organization suffer from it but also the citizens' view of the police organization and everyone who represents it.

Previous research (Skogan, 1996) investigated the public's satisfaction with police activities. The results showed that the public were very discomforted by the level of foot patrolling. Foot patrolling creates, according to Inman (1994), a unique and comforting feeling within individuals in a society. Thus, if the rate of criminality is high in a certain area, citizens will hold the police responsible. On the other hand, if crime rates are low and police officers are visible in the community then the police will be given credit.

Further consideration should be given to the citizens' perception of the police and their attitudes towards them. A community does not consist of homogenous groups; on the contrary, it is composed of several groups which diverge in terms of age, ethnicity and gender. These groups have different representations regarding their view of the police (Manning, 1986). For example, some studies (Brandl et al., 1994; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen & Winfree, 2001) showed that females have reported a more positive attitude towards the police than males did, while others (Salmi, Grönroos & Keskinen, 2004) found no differences between the genders.

Augoustinos and Walker (1995) and Potter (1987) concluded that social representation has an important impact on our attitudes and at the same time offers us a way to understand and communicate with other people in a social context. Furthermore, the social representation of the police can explain certain expectations and beliefs in individuals. The role we assign to the police can also occur in the culture we live in; hence different cultures have different sets of representations of the police. Culture could therefore be a key to explaining why people, who experience police corruption in their home countries, do not have positive attitudes towards the police force in the country where they currently live (Pennington, 2000).

However, one may wonder what accounts for the large attitude differences towards the police? The key to this question could be trust. A previous study (Rosenbaum, Schuck & Costello, 2005) claimed that the trust of the public is considered to be the foundation for the public's cooperation and the principle for the legitimacy of the police in a democratic state. The study also found that expectations play a major role in shaping our attitudes towards different groups in society. For example, if a resident expects that help from the police will have a positive outcome but instead it does not, then disappointment and negative attitudes will follow. Other findings suggested that positive information about the police generated larger attitudinal effects than negative information.

Nevertheless, attitudes towards the police are considered to be relatively stable and usually cannot be influenced by establishing contact with the police during a couple of occasions. Some consideration should also be given to the fact that different sources can influence our attitudes, such as the media or the neighbourhood we live in.

Parrish (1993) examined the role of the media and claimed that citizens' attitudes towards authority figures are based on what appears in the media. The underlying factor for this is the lack of direct contact citizens have with police officers. Thus, the effectiveness of the police will be based on what they see, hear or read.

In order to prevent the negative impact the media have on citizens' attitudes towards the police, law enforcement leaders should often appear on television, newspapers and radio in order to inform and show society their direct involvement in the struggle against crime. This strategy could be considered effective to make the police visible to a large number of citizens at the same time which consequently may affect their attitudes. Based on previous theoretical knowledge and research results the following two hypotheses were developed: (1) Police visibility affects youths' attitudes; (2) There are attitude differences between the genders.

## **Methods**

### *Respondents*

The experiment for this thesis was held with pupils studying at the upper secondary school Katedralskolan in Växjö, Sweden. The choice of respondents was based on a convenience sample; thus resources to carry out a random sample were not available. Participation in the experiment was on a voluntary basis and full anonymity was guaranteed in sense that no lists were created over the respondents during the entire data collection process.

Table 1 provides descriptive information regarding the respondents in this study. The sample is moderately over-represented by females (55,8 percent) but gives a quite fair image of the sex distribution in this school. The age range for the respondents was from 16 to 19 years, with an average of 17,3 (SD = 0,86).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of respondents (N = 86)

Category	Total respondents	Percent of respondents
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	38	44,2
Female	48	55,8
<i>Age</i>		
16	17	19,8
17	31	36,0
18	33	38,4
19	5	5,8

### *Implicit Association Test*

There are two different perspectives in general when measuring attitudes: *explicit* and *implicit* attitudes. The former focuses on conscious attitudes while the latter aims at investigating subconscious attitudes.

A way to measure explicit attitudes is to construct a standard questionnaire test which respondents could fill in. This cannot be applied to measure implicit attitudes since one's subconscious attitudes are manifested in uncontrolled and automatically activated responses. To achieve this measurement, Dr. Anthony Greenwald developed a method called *the Implicit Association Test* (henceforth *IAT*) which measures the respondents' underlying attitudes

(Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz, 1998). According to Greenwald et al. (1998) the measurements are defined in terms of association strengths. This means that the respondents respond faster when the concept and attribute are strongly associated (e.g., *flower* and *pleasant*) than when they are weakly associated (e.g., *insect* and *pleasant*).

This method is based on a *ratio scale* which measure respondents' response time or frequency of target behaviour. This is according to Bohner and Wänke (2002) the highest level of measurement regarding attitudes. One useful quality this method has was suggested by Do-Yeong (2003) to be the respondents' resistance to self-presentation strategies. This means in short that the IAT may reveal the implicit attitudes of respondents even though they try to suppress their real expression.

However, experiments in Rudman and Greenwald (1999) showed an unreliable relation between explicit and implicit measurements but strongly supported IAT as a method to measure implicit stereotypes. This is very useful in overcoming the limitations of self-reporting methods.

### *Measurement*

Two instruments were used in this study, the IAT and a complementary questionnaire. The IAT measured the pupils' attitudes towards the Swedish police force. The test consisted of ten photographs, equally divided between *the police* and *the military*, and five antonym pairs of words. Military photographs were collected from the Internet while police photographs were collected both from the Internet and by photographing students and teachers from the Police Academy at Växjö University. The words related to the qualities of the police were: *trust/distrust*, *competent/incompetent*, *fair/unfair*, *positive/negative* and *pleasant/unpleasant*. The selection of the photographs and antonyms was accomplished after consultation with my supervisor. The reason for selecting *the military* as a secondary group was that they shared common characteristics with *the police* such as the uniform, exercise of power, use of fire arms.

The respondents were in the first session instructed to pair the photographs with either the word police or military. Thereafter they were instructed to relate positive words with police photographs and negative words with military photographs in the first part of the session and do the opposite association in the other part. Totally the test consisted of seven sessions.

After a respondent completed the test, a file was generated containing *the IAT (d') effect*. The output value was within the scope of -1 to +1, where -1 signalled a negative attitude, +1 indicated a positive attitude and 0 showed a neutral attitude towards the Swedish police force.

Finally the respondent was instructed to fill in a complementary questionnaire which was constructed in Swedish and consisted of two parts. The first part included questions regarding the pupils' *age* and *gender* while the second one measured the number of times the respondents' saw the police by using a modified version of Aytar et al. (1997) Likert scale for subjective well-being. Three items were used on the scale which described the activities of the police: *foot patrolling (henceforth FP)*, *car patrolling (henceforth CP)* and *meeting or talking to a police officer (henceforth MT)*. Respondents were asked to estimate for each item how often they saw the police perform these activities for the past year (never, once per three months, once a month, once a week, few times a week, or daily), where the alternative *never* had a rank value of (1) and *daily* had (6).

### *Materials and Apparatus*

The IAT was completed on a laptop computer. The computer used to complete this task was an Acer Aspire, Mobile AMD Sempron 1.6 GHz, 1 GB RAM, 128 MB graphic card. The respondents carried out the test on a 15.4" CrystalBrite LCD display screen from a

distance of about 50 cm. Responses to the test were given using the right- and left keys on the computer keyboard. The test was developed and carried out using the psychology software E-Prime.

### *Procedure*

The data were collected during May 2007 with permission from the supervising teachers for each class. Totally six classes participated in this study. The pupils were first given introductory information regarding the experiment with emphasis to voluntary participation and anonymity.

Pupils were then told to come one at a time into the nearby classroom where the IAT and questionnaire were conducted. The IAT was performed first in order to overcome possible bias that may arise. The reason for this is that the questionnaire signalled what the experiment was about while the IAT did not. After completion, each pupil was told to inform the next person in line to enter the classroom and so forth. Each session took approximately five minutes to carry out.

### *Analysis strategy and variables*

The collected data were analysed using *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (henceforth SPSS)*, version 13. All IAT ( $d'$ ) effect values were exported from E-Prime into SPSS. Values from the questionnaires were handled manually in SPSS.

The independent variables were *age* and *gender* while the dependent variables were the *IAT ( $d'$ ) effect* and the police visibility variables *FP*, *CP* and *MT*. In order to get a value for each respondent to correlate with the IAT ( $d'$ ) effect, the police visibility variables were added together into one variable called *police visibility (henceforth PV)*.

## **Results**

### *Police visibility affects youths' attitudes*

The hypothesis that youths' attitudes were affected by the police visibility was not substantiated. T-test revealed that there was no significant correlation between the *IAT ( $d'$ ) effect* and *PV* ( $t = -.562$ ;  $p > .05$ ;  $p = .575$ ). However, the results showed differences between the three police visibility items used in the questionnaire. Car patrolling had high visibility while foot patrolling or meeting respectively talking to a police officer had low visibility.

**Table 2.** *Items of police visibility: medians (Mdn), means (M) and standard deviations (SD)*

	<i>Respondents</i>		
	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Police visibility items</i>			
Foot patrolling	2	2,50	1,17
Car patrolling	4	3,92	1,05
Met or talked to a police officer	1	1,56	.82

**Note:** 1 = Never to 6 = daily

### *Gender differences in attitudes*

The hypothesis that there are considerable gender differences in attitudes was not confirmed. Pearson's Chi-Square test showed that there was no significant difference between the genders ( $df = 84$ ;  $p > .05$ ;  $p = .48$ ).

Conversely, the results showed that males had a slightly more positive attitude towards the Swedish police force than females. In general, the respondents had a moderate positive attitude towards the Swedish police force ( $d' = .28$ ).

**Table 3.** *Frequencies of the IAT ( $d'$ ) effect regarding to gender*

	<i>Respondents</i>		
	<i>IAT</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	.30	38	.34
Female	.26	48	.37
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>.28</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>.35</b>

*Note:* -1 = negative to +1 = positive

### ***Discussion***

This study represents an attempt to understand more clearly the relationship between youths' attitudes towards the Swedish police force and police visibility. The last couple of years have produced a tremendous amount of research examining peoples' attitudes towards the police. Previous research (Salmi et al., 2004; Brandl et al., 1994; Sims, Hooper & Peterson, 2002) has focused on general attitudes while this study examines the attitudes of upper secondary school pupils ( $N = 86$ ). Two specific hypotheses were addressed in this study: (1) Police visibility affects youths' attitudes; (2) There are attitude differences between the genders. The results showed no significant correlation for either of the hypotheses but revealed however that youths are moderately positive towards the Swedish police force ( $d' = .28$ ). One possible explanation for the low IAT ( $d'$ ) effect could be, according to Jesilow, Meyer and Namazzi (1995), that youths "may always be more critical of authority than their elders who have much more of a stake in maintaining order". In the same manner, one has to consider that culture factors could broadly affect youths' attitudes toward the police (Pennington, 2000).

Additionally, attitude differences between the genders were not extensively apparent. However, a modest difference revealed that males had a more positive attitude than females. The gender aspect has played an important part in early research regarding youths' attitudes. As mentioned earlier, some studies (Brandl et al., 1994; Cao, Frank & Cullen, 1996; Taylor, et al., 2001) showed that females have reported a more positive attitude towards the police than males did, while others (Salmi et al., 2004) found no differences between the genders.

The internal validity of this study can be discussed in many aspects. One is that self-reporting surveys have the limitations that respondents could build up a prior understanding of what their answers would mean in the results. This could consequently make the respondents try to suppress their true underlying attitudes. In order to prevent this problem,

the IAT method was applied in this study. Previous research (Do-Yeong, 2003; Greenwald et al., 1998; Greenwald, Nosek, Banaji, 2003) showed that the IAT method has high validity and reliability in revealing the respondents underlying attitudes when they try to suppress them in self-reporting measurements. The internal validity of this study was very hard to control because of the problem with the photographs used in the IAT method. Did the respondents actually form an opinion about the police officer in the photograph or was it about the police organisation as a whole? Moreover, a plausible explanation that could threaten the internal validity is that the respondents could have informed each other about the experiment during the different testing sessions and therefore created a bias. In conclusion, one could have considered the idea of measuring the explicit attitudes and compare them to the implicit results. But due to the time limitations given for this study, this was not possible to perform.

Furthermore, some consideration should also be given to the ecological validity of this study. One could argue that the IAT experiment was not conducted in a real setting; hence the lack of actual sight, feeling or procedure in the interaction with police officers could be a key for understanding the results. Development and improvement of the research method is important for future studies. However, the current results provide support to previous studies in terms of police visibility and external validity (Salmi et al., 2000; Salmi et al., 2004; Skogan, 1996).

Moreover, this study has some limitations when regarding the reliability of the results. As mentioned earlier, the choice of respondents was based on a convenience sample and not on a random. In order to strengthen the reliability of the results, all experiment sessions were conducted in my presence. However, one has to take under consideration that my presence could at the same time have had a negative impact on the respondents; hence they could have experienced a distraction which consequently could have affected the results.

In conclusion, future research should be directed towards understanding clearly how youths' attitudes towards the police are formed. For example, one could investigate if ethnicity plays a central role in shaping our attitudes towards the police or how the media build up a stereotypical view of the police (Parrish, 1993). One potentially informative path for such research would be analyzing the interactions between youths and the police, focusing on the social cognitive processes used in stereotype formation.

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