Understanding Intergroup Communication as a Pathway for Improving Police Legitimacy

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Internal and external communications are essential to the success of police organizations. In this essay, we focus primarily on external communications, reflecting on how a body of theory and research from the study of communication can be used to improve relationships between police and communities.

Police scholars and practitioners have identified communication as a key to successful policing for decades. As Stanford law professor David Alan Sklansky (2011) has written, policing's "primary technology is verbal." Likewise, former police chief Darrel Stephens co-authored an entire "tool-kit for police executives" on strategic communication, in which he acknowledges the importance of communication with members of different groups within a community. Scholarship in the fields of social psychology, communication, and sociolinguistics teaches us how communication can reinforce social categorizations (Dragojevic, 2018), sometimes resulting in stereotyping and bias that can damage police-community relations.

The ideal of community policing inspires police to build cohesive relationships with communities as a means of co-producing public safety. Implementing that ideal has often been difficult, due in part to communication challenges between police and communities. Furthermore, communities are not homogeneous; they consist of different groups that may have very different perspectives on the police. Communication mediates intergroup relationships and can play a powerful role in enhancing or diminishing them (Gallois & Giles, 1998). Thus, an important step in implementing genuine forms of community policing is understanding how communicative processes between groups work. Enter the field of *intergroup communication*.

The relationship between police and the public is predominantly *intergroup* in nature (Giles & Harwood, 2018; Giles & Maass, 2016). Intergroup communication occurs when an interaction between two or more people is based primarily on their social group membership rather than on their individual personalities (Hill & Giles 2018). For example, when a police officer stops a vehicle for a traffic infraction, the interaction is typically formal and based primarily on the group roles the two people occupy in that moment – one is a police officer and the other has violated traffic regulations.

Evidence from research and theory on *intergroup communication* offers a path toward overcoming intergroup barriers and anxieties, and expanding mutual respect between law enforcement and the communities they serve (Giles, Maguire, & Hill, *in press*). Intergroup communication is a useful framework for thinking about how to improve communication and trust between groups in conflict with one another. It is, therefore, a potentially valuable perspective for thinking about how to improve relationships between police and the public.

One of the foundations of intergroup communication is a social psychological theory called *intergroup contact theory*. This suggests that intergroup contact, when it occurs under certain conditions (e.g., few power differentials between and institutional support from, both parties) can reduce prejudice between groups. Research has found that interventions based on intergroup contact theory, which involve bringing conflicting groups together to engage in dialogue, can reduce prejudice and enhance trust. This finding is consistent across many different types of conflicting groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

While the intergroup communication framework has been applied to the relationships between police and the public in many important publications over the last 15 years (e.g., Choi & Giles, 2012), limited research has been published testing the effect of intergroup communication *interventions* on prejudice and trust between these two groups.

The first two authors have helped to create an intervention called "VOICES" based, in large part, on principles from intergroup communication. The intervention involves bringing police and specific community groups together to engage in dialogue intended to reveal the humanity of all participants. It has been used by the Santa Barbara Police Department to build trust and improve relationships between the police and several different communities, including ethnic minorities, previously incarcerated adults, and LGBTQ+ residents. Anecdotal evidence from these sessions is very positive and more academically rigorous tests are planned (Hill, Giles, & Maguire, 2021).

The intergroup communication approach that we recommend here is consistent with procedural justice theory (PJT), an approach that has received significant attention in recent years (Maguire, Lowrey, & Johnson, 2017). Although the two approaches are consistent with each other, intergroup communication interventions focus on much more than procedural niceties (e.g. respect) during fleeting contacts between police and the public. Intergroup communication interventions focus on structured dialogue and genuine listening in a neutral setting that seeks to minimize the deeply felt power imbalances that characterize many police-citizen encounters.

Interventions based on PJT are valuable, but may lack sufficient depth to cure the relationships between police and historically marginalized groups (Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Markel, 2014). Addressing these "hot spots" of discontent with the police requires much more direct interventions. Intergroup communication provides a powerful, theory-driven, and evidence-based framework for designing such interventions.

Drawing on some of the lessons from intergroup communication can help police agencies build trust and improve public perceptions of their legitimacy.

The next step is to begin testing these interventions in a variety of settings to understand the conditions under which they are most effective in reducing prejudice and building trust. Police-academic partnerships are one promising avenue through which police agencies can begin to test communication-based interventions under controlled conditions to improve the knowledge base on how to improve relationships between police and communities. These issues are highly salient right now, and they deserve serious attention from police leaders and scholars.

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