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Exploring Age and Perception of the Policing in a Post-Colonial Society

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to analyse citizens age and their perception of the police in Trinidad and Tobago. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service occupies a pivotal role in keeping citizens safe, reducing the fear of crime and victimisation and protecting the moral fabric of society. However, due to the country's colonial heritage and police system, these factors often challenged the accomplishment these duties. This study followed an adaptive approach using a qualitative research method and relied on open-ended face to face interviews. Primary data were collected from 50 participants representing various geographical locations throughout Trinidad and Tobago and this was done via a snowball sampling technique. The findings from this study highlighted that citizens age was imperative towards how they perceive the police. It was suggested that police use of force, lack of respect, profiling and illegitimate behaviour often influenced negative experiences and perceptions amongst younger adult citizens. Whilst this was less likely amongst mature adults, these citizens also held less favourable perception of the police mainly because of officers involvement in delinquent activities such as abuse of authority, drug trafficking and corruption. A major finding from this study was the influence that citizens socioeconomic status had on perception of the police in Trinidad and Tobago. The findings of this study could be useful for police institutions who can utilise the concepts to make improvements and enhance the relationship between citizens and the police.

Key Word: Citizens; Police; Perceptions; Trinidad and Tobago; Age.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1- Perception of the Police

Perception of the police are developed from the ways in which citizens evaluate and interpret officers based on direct and indirect contact whereby people develop different attitudes and judgements towards police officers and the institution (Warren et al., 2006; Eller et al., 2007). Attitudes and judgements are sociologically important when considering the coercive authority of policing (Bittner, 1970) and this often become a significant factor towards shaping institutional efficiency and effectiveness (Skogan, 2005) and police legitimacy (Rice et al., 2005; Skogan, 2006). When police institutions are able to develop and maintain positive relations with citizens in the communities, it is more likely that citizens will comply with the law (Tyler, 1990) and this could result in a reduction of criminal activities, fulfil a preventative strategy and eventually safer communities (O'Conner, 2008; Renauer & Covelli, 2011).

1.2- Background and Problem

Historically, the relationship between citizens and police officers in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) have been strained and one with tension which is traceable to the country's colonial history (Deosaran, 2002; King, 2009). When considering the implementation of the colonial model of police in T&T during British colonisation, in modern times this model became known for the use of brutal force onto citizens (Cole, 2003; Mars, 2002, 2007), officers' ineptitudes (Stanislas, 2014) and poor community relations (Deosaran, 2002; King, 2009). Fundamental to colonisation was economic exploitation of colonies which shaped a socioeconomic hierarchy between the powerful ruling class who established a police system to dominate and exploit lower class citizens (Chambliss, 1975; Quinney, 1977). Therefore, the T&T local citizens distant themselves from the police resulting in legitimacy being undermined (Pino and Johnson, 2011; Kuhns et al., 2011; Maguire et al., 2017).

Post-Independence in T&T highlighted the police becoming allies with government and politicians based on race/ethnicity and this fostered a divide between the multi-ethnic nation (Clarke, 1993; Johnson & Kochel, 2012). The last decade has seen a sharp increase of violent crimes in T&T (Townsend, 2009; Maguire et al., 2017) mainly within the disadvantaged communities of North and East of Trinidad involving young people where officers solved less than 13% of the crimes committed (Wells & Katz, 2008). Pino & Johnson (2011)

suggested that the low detection and resolution rates involved police officers' ineptitude, and corruption, including the drug trafficking and gang activities (Scott Drug Report, 1984; Townsend, 2009).

As society experience modernisation, so does policing because of changes with, law, policy, practice and social development (Wallace, 2012). There have been many efforts to modernise the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) in the areas of training, education, governance, accountability and transparency which attempted to develop a service-oriented style of policing (O'Dowd, 1991; Seaby, 1993). Reform attempts failed due to poor communication between citizens and the police, officers were refusal to participate in modernisation programmes and political complexities/influences. As a result, the TTPS continued with its colonial policing system which focuses on public order duties, coercive tactics and being reactive (Deosaran, 2002; King, 2009). As a result, the TTPS is considered an ineffective and outdated institution which contributes to increased crimes, poor community-police relations and citizens being fearful of the police. Citizens have developed a lack of trust and confidence in officers and the institution due to officers delinquent behaviour and their ability to manipulate the law and not be punished for committing crime (Townsend, 2009; Pino & Johnson, 2011).

1.3 – Justification for Study

Previously, research on public perception of the police mainly focused on citizens demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age and gender in developed countries such as the USA, UK and Canada (Brown & Benedict, 2002; O'Conner, 2008). However, there is a nascent body of literature that exist on citizens perception of the police in T&T, and at the time of this research, there was no specific study which attempted to study age and perception of the police in T&T. As a result, this study was aimed at using citizens age (young and mature adults) and testing it in T&T which was intended to expand the present literature to include post-colonial societies. Due to ethical principle, this study did not involve citizens under 18 years of age.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 – Colonial Policing Model

The Colonial Policing model can be traced back to the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) which was designed to suppress disorders and political problems in Ireland (Tobias, 1977; Sinclair, 2006). The RIC was a police force which mirrored the Army because many officers were ex-soldiers and continued to maintain a military ethos such as military drills, firearm training, and public order duties (Tobias, 1977; Anderson & Killingray, 1991). This model of policing was eventually transferred to newly acquired British colonies and was often met with hostility and rejection from local citizens because colonies varied in size, race/ethnicities and culture which differed from Ireland.

According to Anderson & Killingray (1991) senior officers (gazetted) and most Inspectors were Caucasians (white) and recruited from the army because of their military training and ethos (Tobias, 1977; Cole, 2003). Mawby (2005) suggested that the recruitment of white senior officers was to maintain minimal interaction between these officers and the local citizens whilst Junior officers (constable to sergeant) were recruited locally or from other colonies (Sinclair, 2006; Bell, 2013). This ensured that indigenous officers never attained a management rank which could have jeopardised the objectives of colonisation (Tobias, 1977; Sinclair, 2006). Stanislas (2014) argued that colonial police officers were recruited with minimal education and Sinclair (2006) highlighted that it was important for police officer on the colonies to favour sports, be no more than 35 years and be physically fit and well-built.

Bell (2013) stated that colonial police officers were mainly responsible for the colony's protection from internal and external threats, ensuring the local workforce were compliant and protecting foreign traders. Arnold (1986) further highlighted those colonial police officers were not restricted to law enforcement duties but often fulfil the role of judge and jury by providing rapid punishment onto local citizens. According to Mars (1998) policing on colonies were synchronised with the use of coercion and violence onto local citizens (Jefferies, 1932; Brewer, 1994). Arnold (1986) argued that coercion was used by officers to prevent local citizens from challenging the colonial power and authority (Das and Verma, 1998; Bell, 2013). Consequently, colonial police officers established a reputation of being rude, unhelpful, violent and unsympathetic with the local people causing a lack of cooperation and strained relationships (Anderson and Killingray, 1991; Cole, 2003).

On the colonies, police officers behaviours frequently became a concern, for example, corruption, viewed by citizens as enemies and oppressors, using intimidation tactics, agents of the state and coercion all accumulated and made the police distant from the local communities and citizens (Arnold, 1986; King, 2009; Bell, 2013). According to Fanon (1963), colonisation fostered white-collar crime and corruption on the colonies and was controlled by European who held a monopoly on political and economic authority (Agozino, 2003; Sinclair, 2006; Kerrigan and Sookoo, 2013). In T&T, the colonial policing system was design for police officers to be the state's apparatus of authority and fulfil the aims and objectives of the colonial government, whilst ensuring that the local citizens (subjects) were law compliant and did not resist (Deosaran, 2002; King, 2009).

2.2 – Age and Perception of the Police

Young people were more likely to have negative perceptions of the police when compared to older citizens (Brown and Benedict, 2002; Brick *et al.*, 2009). Previous research suggested that this was mainly associated with young people's lack of satisfaction with officers poor efforts in crime reduction (Hindelang, 1974), excessive use of force (Langan *et al.*, 2001) and the lack of respect from officers (Weitzer, 1999; Brown & Benedict, 2002). According to McAra & McVie (2005) a different explanation for young people's negative perception towards police officers is, these citizens were mainly concerned with their independence and freedom above their security. As a result, this often-developed antagonising contact between officers and young people and impacted on a peaceful relationship. Some explanations for the antagonising contacts are, officers minimal respect for young people because of their age, especially those from lower social status, (Turk, 1969), young people were more likely to challenge officer's authority (Reisig & Correia, 1997; Dai *et al.*, 2011) and the amount of time young people spend on the streets being involved in delinquent activities and becoming visible to police officers (McAra & McVie, 2005; Crawford, 2009). When younger people have high involuntary and confrontational contact with the police, this often develop dissatisfaction, negative experiences and unfavourable perceptions (Kusow *et al.*, 1997; Snyder *et al.*, 1996).

A small body of research on young people's experience with the police in T&T showed varied results, mainly related on race/ethnicity (Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Ryan *et al.*, 2013). According to these studies, a large number of young male (African Heritage) perceived police officers in T&T as unapproachable, corrupted and untrustworthy. However, the majority of young male and females (Indian Heritage) perceived police officers as approachable and helpful.

III. METHODOLOGY

Considering the lack of research on policing in T&T, this study was aimed at exploring the public perception (adults) of police officers in T&T. It used a qualitative design to provide descriptive information on citizens perception of police officers in T&T. This type of data was best obtained from in-depth dialogue and where participants were given undivided attention and opportunities to fully express and discuss their views and opinion. A semi-structured type of interview was beneficial for flexibility by allowing the researcher to reconstruct the way in which questions were asked and provided opportunities for putting forward new questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2003; Bryman, 2008).

Due to the author's lack of acquaintances in T&T, the snowball technique was used to make initial contact with people who might have some level of relevance or interest on the topic being researched. The initial contacts made further contacts with other people through knowledge, common bond or social/professional affiliations, who were then asked to participate in the study (Saunders *et al.*, 2003; Bryman, 2008). The samples were drawn from different geographical locations of T&T where 50 interviews were conducted and participants were selected based on their demographic characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, income/employment and marital status. This process was used to ensure that data was collected from a spectrum of characteristics to avoid bias with views and opinions. This study followed the adaptive theory which uses established theories and empirical data and compared them to identify new theory, elaborate or confirm existing theories (Layder, 1998). The abductive analysis technique by Timmermans and Tavory (2012) was used in this study. The Abductive analysis approach uses a thematic coding framework where themes are developed from the empirical data (Hewege, 2010; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

IV. FINDINGS and ANALYSIS

4.1- Participants Demographics

Observations made during this study indicated that most participants represented the disadvantaged and middle-class communities and only a small amount was from developed communities. Most participants from the affluent communities when approached to participate in this study decline. Participants formed a comprehensive representation of the various ethnic backgrounds which existed in T&T, but more than 50% of these participants were from an African or Indian heritage. The majority of participants were employed fulltime, with less than 2% being self-employed and unemployed. There was a good balance in participants age range, the male to female ratio and the single and married interviewees which provided some equilibrium to the data obtained. However, the majority of participants held an undergraduate qualification or lower whilst a small number held a postgraduate qualification.

4.2 - Findings

The majority of participant ($n=43$) in this study highlighted that police officers in T&T treat citizens differently based on their age. They stated that it common for police officers to treat younger people who were approximately less than 30 years old in an aggressive and profiling manner which frequently involved physical abuse. These participants indicated that based on their experiences and those of acquaintances, officers

whopatrolled their communities, often stop and search young males from an African heritage to a greater extent and males from an Indian heritage to a lesser extent for drugs and firearms without a legitimate reason. Similar finding was made by authors such as Deosaran (2002) and King (2009) who discovered that police officers in T&T often harassed citizens and this often led to contentious relationships between both parties and negative experience. These participants highlighted that on most occasions officer would find nothing illegal on these males and the officers sometimes plant small quantity of drugs on the individual's body to justify the stop and search and effect an arrested and charged for the offence. A study by Pino & Johnson (2011) suggested that police officers in T&T sometime plant drugs on innocent citizens to achieve an arrest. As a result, the finding from this study could suggest a delinquent behavioural pattern amongst some officers and abuse of authority. According to Turks (1969) these aspects could foster negative and less favourable experiences with the police.

Some participants from within the majority group stated that they had personal experiences and knowledge of young people (mainly males) being approached by police officers and interrogated for no apparent reason. These participants were of the view that officers behaved in this manner because they perceived younger people to be less knowledgeable about the laws, have minimal life experience, unaware of the procedures for reporting officers abusive behaviour and did not fully understand their rights as citizens. Therefore, younger people were often an easier target for police to abuse. These participants highlighted that junior officers were often pressured by senior officers to make arrest in an attempt to increase the police performance statistics. Another reason for targeting younger people was junior officers could increase their personal arrest rate record which was useful for promotion. As a result, many young people often became victims of police statistics. These findings are similar to those of McAra & McVie (2005) whose study of youths in Scotland suggested that police officers often underestimated young people as being less knowledgeable and experienced. Consequently, younger people often develop less favourable perception of the police.

According to the majority of participants, police officers in T&T were less likely to harass, intimidate or abuse people who were mature especially those were approximately over 30 years old. Participants suggested that mature citizens had a higher probability of retaliating against police abuse, understood their rights much better, were more experienced and knowledgeable about the laws and were more confident in making formal complaints against officers. These participants agreed that there were citizens who were involved in delinquent activities, for example, firearm offences, robberies, prostitution and narcotics but maintained that this was only a small number of young people. It was highlighted that police officers in T&T often labelled all young people as criminals especially those from disadvantaged communities.

The majority of participants from this study highlighted that police officers in T&T treated people of various age group differently but more importantly, citizens socioeconomic status was an influential factor towards treatment. Participants explained that police officers in T&T often treat younger people from disadvantaged communities in a degrading and disrespect manner. On one hand male officers were more likely to profile the young males and sexually harass females, but on the other hand, they behaved differently with citizens from the affluent communities. It was further highlighted that officers were professional, helpful and understanding to the citizens from affluent communities, and this was mainly because of these citizens status in society or their parents being very influential in high profile positions. Some participants further indicated that people from affluent communities in T&T were usually connected to politicians and the Commissioner of Police. As a result, officers often approach these citizens in a more respectful and courteous manner. These participants stated that police officers in T&T often arrested both young and mature citizens from disadvantaged communities for minor offences, whereby officers were more likely to take minimal or no action against citizens from affluent communities. According to authors such as Bonger (1916); Bottomore and Rubel (1965); Chambliss (1975) and Young (1979) the development of capitalist system and economic competition generated tension between the powerful elite class and the powerless class. As a result, this exaggerated the crime of the powerless whilst concealing the crimes of the powerful class which mainly went unnoticed.

An example was obtained from these participants who expressed their views, opinions and experiences about age and how it impacted on policing in T&T. This example demonstrates how age became instrumental towards the service citizens receive. A 19-year-old Indo-Trinidadian male (SWD 14) participant described his personal experience.

"I was on my way home from work one evening and my jeans was slightly under waistline, it's the style now with many of us young people at the moment. Then all of a sudden, a police van pulled up next to me and a woman officer in the van told me to pull my jeans up. I told her I was comfortable like this, and my clothes was not causing a problem anyone. Instantly, two male officers rushed out the van and started asking me if I didn't hear the female officer and if I had a hearing difficulty. I told them I can hear good and had no hearing problem. The male officers grabbed my hands and by my collar, pushed me against the van and began searching my body for drugs. They emptied my bag and dropped my lunch box on the road and when they could not find anything illegal, one of the officers dropped a small ball of foil paper on the ground. They questioned

me about what was in the foil paper, and I looked at them and said, you know that is not mine. One of the officers picked up the foil paper, opened it and there was a small amount of marijuana inside. Both male officers began laughing and I was arrested for possession of marijuana. I was taken to the police station and charged. I asked for my phone call to inform my mother of what happened and one of the male officers who arrested me shouted at me saying, young stupid criminals like you have no rights, so I didn't need a phone call."

(Interview #14)

V. CONCLUSION

5.1- Summary of Findings

Citizen's perception of the police is paramount towards police effectiveness and efficiency because the police depend on citizens cooperation to prevent and solve crimes in society (Brown & Benedict, 2010; Renauer and Covelli, 2011). According to Tyler (1990) citizens are more likely to comply with the direction and advice given by officers when they believe that the police have the best interest of citizens and when there are favourable perceptions towards policing. The findings of this study suggested that the age of citizens in T&T played a crucial role on how perceptions of the police were developed and shaped. The data obtained highlighted that younger people were more likely to develop negative experiences and less favourable perceptions of the police due to poor treatment, antagonising relations, officer's delinquent behaviour, and lack of impartiality.

According to the data obtained, police officers in T&T often created distinctions between younger and mature citizens and their treatment varied in accordance with age. There is evidence to suggest that police officers were more likely to harass and intimidate younger people but unlikely to do the same with mature citizens. As a result, young people were more likely to develop and hold unfavourable experiences and perceptions of police officers. On the other hand, mature citizens simultaneously held unfavourable perceptions of the police in T&T. Unlike young people, mature citizens were unlikely to be harassed and profiled but did not trust the police because of officers' involvement in delinquency such as accepting bribes, gang involvement, excessive use of force and abuse of authority. As a result, mature citizens had a lack of trust and confidence in the police, and this influence their perception towards officers.

A further problem highlighted by the finding of this study was the bias stance between officers and citizens of various socioeconomic status. The findings suggested that police officers in T&T treated younger citizens from the disadvantaged communities in a harsh and profiling manner and on the other hand they treated young people from the affluent communities in a professional and respectful manner. The data showed that young people's family affiliation with influential people and position in society often impacted on their relationship with the police and the treatment they receive from officer.

5.1- Theoretical Implications

The data obtained from this study highlighted important sociological implications for existing studies by authors such as Brown & Benedict (2002); O'Conner (2008) and Renauer & Covelli (2011). Age was found to be a key factor when research perception of the police in post-colonial societies. The findings from this study can now be used to expand and extend the present literature to include age and perception of police officers in a post-colonial society. Due to the lack of empirical research in post-colonial societies such as T&T, this new knowledge and understanding could be used to conduct research in other post-colonial societies and serve as a platform to understand the topic in such settings with an aim of fostering harmonious relationships between citizens and the police.

5.2 - Future Research

Throughout this study it was discovered that citizens age was closely interrelated with their socioeconomic status. However, there is no previous study which is known of which attempted to study socioeconomic status and perception of the police in post-colonial societies. Citizen's trust and confidence in the police was also another emerging and key factor that have been understudied in post-colonial societies like T&T. Due to the lack of research and knowledge on these factors, it would be beneficial for future research to further explore these factors.

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