

The Impact of Political Oversight on Public Attitudes Towards the Police

Clare McGovern¹
Department of Political Science
University of British Columbia
cmcgover@interchange.ubc.ca

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Policing is a particularly sensitive public service – it combines coercive powers with daily contact with the public, meaning that any misuse of these powers has an impact which is serious, immediate and widespread. Such a high level of risk, combined with the lack of exit-based accountability² points to a need for oversight mechanisms – to ensure that coercive powers are not abused and also to give the community some choice in the way it is policed (O’Rawe and Moore, 1997, 107 and 134).

Public administration literature has generally focused on the direct effects of accountability – positing that scrutiny affects bureaucratic performance to the extent that it alters the behaviour of the overseen. This paper examines the *indirect* impact of oversight, which flows from the public’s reaction to the accountability process. I argue that observing accountability mechanisms in action affects public expectations of the bureaucrats’ likely reaction and the service delivered as a result. This is important because agencies of the state often require public co-operation in order to fulfill their mandate. In particular, the police need information from community groups in order to detect crime, apprehend offenders and prevent disorder.

It follows that research on accountability should focus not only on elites (i.e. the overseers such as politicians, auditors and the courts and the overseen such as government ministers and public servants) but also on individual members of the public. How do they view institutions such as the police? How is this affected by the way in which elites hold the police to account? Crucially, do these attitudes affect the willingness of individuals to co-operate with the police?

This significance of mass attitudes and behaviour suggests a methodology that could be useful to public administration scholars. Experimental methods are increasingly employed in the branches of political science most concerned with individual behaviour such as political psychology, political economy and electoral studies (see McDermott, 2002 for an overview). They could also be used to investigate the factors affecting public co-operation with government services. Specific to the study of accountability, they can focus on the causal process connecting oversight, cues given to the public, individual attitudes towards bureaucrats and co-operation with government institutions.

This paper describes a pilot project to test these linkages using large-N experimental data. I begin with an overview of the public administration literature on accountability which to date has focused on how oversight affects the behaviour of the overseen. Section 2 sets out the argument that oversight can also have an indirect effect on public service performance, via public expectations of bureaucratic behaviour and their consequent willingness to co-operate with those bureaucrats. Section 3 puts the experimental data in context by describing police accountability arrangements in Canada, where the experiment was conducted. Section 4 describes the design of the experiment and reviews the advantages and limitations of using experiments in social science. Section 5 presents results from the first wave of the experiment. These suggest that the powers of accountability holders are more important than the content of their demands in affecting expectations of police behaviour. Section 6

² Individuals cannot simply opt out of being policed, nor can they look for an alternative provider if their existing police service is ineffective, unresponsive or oppressive.

concludes by suggesting how experiments could be combined with real-world data to provide a more complete picture of the effect of accountability on policing.

1. The accountability literature: a focus on direct effects.

I use James Hurley's definition of accountability: Person A is accountable to Person B if B has the power to demand explanations of A's decisions and to impose sanctions if A does not perform to B's satisfaction (2006, 127-128). To this I add two points. Firstly, there is a prior stage, where the principal makes certain demands of the agent – for example that she perform a particular task or achieve a certain outcome. Secondly, the principal may have positive as well as negative powers – she may reward performance that pleases her as well as sanction performance that does not.

Kaare Strøm conceptualises political oversight as a series of principal-agent relationships: voters delegate policy choice and resource allocation to politicians, who in turn delegate budgets and powers to bureaucrats with a mandate to implement policy and provide services. Within bureaucracies, senior public servants have similar relationships of delegation and oversight with their junior colleagues (2000, 266-268)³. Many researchers have pointed out that this chain relationship, with voters at one end and junior bureaucrats at the other is a simplification of the reality. Firstly, public servants are also answerable to and can be sanctioned by a range of non-elected actors – the courts; professional bodies and auditors and inspectors (Light, 1993; Behn 2001, 56-8; Freidson 2001; Harlow 2002). Secondly, under New Public Management many public services have been contracted out meaning that those providing the services are accountable to private shareholders and to individual users of their services rather than to politicians (Ingraham, 2005, 19-20). Thirdly, the rise of deliberative democracy, which encourages citizens to engage directly in the evaluation and choice of policy options means that citizens can hold public servants to account themselves, rather than relying on politicians to do so (Held, 2006, 246-252; Fung 2000).

Whatever the exact configuration of accountability relationships between the public, politicians and public servants in any given situation, research on the topic of oversight has tended to study the *direct relationship* between the overseer and the overseen: what the overseer does, how the overseen responds, and how this behaviour affects the public service delivered. This focus can be seen in a range of literatures. Within the “economics of organisation” tradition, which assumes rational and self-interested behaviour on the part of all actors, accountability arrangements are analysed as ways to solve principal-agent problems. Debate therefore centres on selecting the most appropriate agent and either monitoring her actions after delegation or to align her incentives with those of the principal⁴. This body of research therefore sees the actions of the agent and consequently the overall outcome as a function of the principal's actions and inactions. Findings from this literature

³ See also Kam, 2000, on how parliamentary efforts to hold government ministers to account motivates those same ministers to scrutinise the actions of public servants.

⁴ On adverse selection and moral hazard, see for example Moe, 1984, 754-756; Miller, 1993, 120-138; Horn, 1995, 37-39, 88, 127 and Shepsle and Bonchek, 1997, 360-370.

strongly influence New Public Management prescriptions for clear accountability lines⁵: namely for each public service there should be only one principal and one agent, meaning the agent is given one set of coherent demands to fulfill and cannot shirk responsibility by blaming poor performance on other actors⁶.

Even when the assumption of a self-interested bureaucracy is relaxed and scholars accept other motivations for behaviour,⁷ research still focuses on how accountability affects public service outcomes via its *effect on public servants themselves*. Thus, those that warn of the dysfunctional effects of too much oversight couch their arguments in terms of stifling the creativity of an agency's staff (Behn, 2001, 13), an emphasis on rule compliance and conflict avoidance to the detriment of effectiveness (Adelberg and Batson, 1978; Light, 1993, 230) and a focus on short-term responsiveness at the expense of long-term strategic thinking (Campbell, 2001, 260, 271-2; Ingraham, 2005, 18). This focus on the impact of accountability on bureaucratic behaviour, and hence performance, is also borne out in a number of recent studies across a wide range of policy sectors. These include empirical research on the effects of oversight on teachers' classroom practices (Louis et al, 2005); hospitals' management of medical error (Mello et al, 2006) and macro-economic performance (Hicken et al, 2005).

2. Indirect effects of oversight.

The theoretical and empirical work cited above builds a convincing case that accountability mechanisms have an effect on public service performance via their impact on bureaucratic behaviour. After all, oversight is designed to alter the behaviour of the overseen so it would be surprising if it had no effect whatsoever, albeit that these effects may be inadvertent or undesirable. This paper seeks to add to our understanding by pointing to another mechanism connecting accountability and public service performance: public expectations of bureaucratic behaviour.

The importance of public co-operation

The starting point for this argument is that the success or failure of a policy does not rest on the actions of bureaucrats alone: most government agencies require the co-operation of the public. For example, schools need parents to make sure their children go to school and encourage them to do homework; refuse collectors need residents to put their garbage outside on the right day and separate their recycling; even agencies with coercive powers need public co-operation in order to run efficiently – tax authorities do not have the resources to investigate the affairs of every person within their jurisdiction, so rely on the fact that large numbers of people voluntarily file tax returns and/or report changes in financial circumstances.

In particular, government agencies need *information* from the public in order to understand their needs, and design policy that will meet those needs. Feldman and Khademian argue that

⁵ Whether achieved through contracts, market mechanisms or by separating administrative functions from political ones.

⁶ See Hood, 2002 on avoiding the blame game and Barzelay, 2001 for an overview of New Public Management.

⁷ Such as professional, organisational and ethical norms, altruism or a desire to provide a quality service.

local knowledge of a neighbourhood is often discounted in public management. This is because it is not collected in a structured and systematic manner and is therefore not viewed as scientific (2004, 25). However, they point out that it provides a “the mundane yet expert understanding of local conditions” (ibid, 25). James Scott has argued the many of the failures of modernist bureaucracies are due to this discounting of local knowledge, meaning that programmes which seek to improve a society’s welfare are designed without a detailed understanding of the complexities of that society (1998, 313-319).

This argument is especially pertinent to policing where effectiveness relies on detailed knowledge of the area being policed – where does crime occur, who is involved, when is tension between different groups likely to lead to violence? On-going liaison between the police and the community encourages members of the public to report crimes and co-operate as witnesses, thus improving police performance (Weitzer, 1995, 1). For this reason, The Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland⁸ encouraged strong links between the police and all sections of the community, arguing that it facilitated a strategic problem-solving approach to crime prevention and detection. Under this model, the police scan all the information they get from the public to identify patterns of crime and disorder or trends which could cause problems in the future. They then determine the causes of those patterns, and, with the help of the community, devise solutions. This information is used to secure resources (e.g. drugs education and rehabilitation programmes, if a high proportion of the area’s crime is drug-related). (1999, 40-45). The data needed for this type of policing is locally specific, can change quickly and is clearly sensitive – there therefore needs to be a high level of trust in the police for members of the public to volunteer this information.

Observing the accountability process: the impact on public attitudes towards the police

I argue that this level of trust is affected by the way in which accountability holders use their oversight powers. Members of the public know that accountability holders such as politicians have powers to reward or punish a police service which does/does not comply with its demands – for example by increasing or reducing budgets and retaining or replacing senior police officers. In other words, police officers have incentives to comply with the demands of politicians. I therefore hypothesise that when an individual observes an accountability holder making a demand, she will, *ceteris paribus*, expect police officers to comply with that demand.

Demands made by politicians therefore affect public expectations of police behaviour: what they are likely to do and how they are likely to treat particular groups within society. Depending on the content of the demand, this expectation will affect an individual’s attitude towards the police and consequently their willingness to co-operate with the police. Figure 1 summarises how I theorise the impact of oversight on public service performance – showing how an accountability process can have both direct and indirect effects.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.

⁸ This Commission was set up as part of the Northern Ireland peace process to suggest reforms which would build the confidence of both the Catholic and Protestant communities (ICPNI, 1999, 1-9).

The psychological literature on attitude formation has found that it is not only the content of a message that affects the audience's attitudes, but also the identity of the person delivering that message. An audience will be more inclined to believe (and agree with) statements made by someone they trust, or who they think shares their values.⁹ My argument is slightly different – we are interested in whether observing a politician demand that the police do something affects one's expectation of whether the police will actually do it. In other words, we are interested in the observer's attitude towards the *recipient* of the demand (the police), not the person making the demand. I therefore hypothesise that the identity of the person making the demand is important, not in terms of their values, but rather their powers to make the police comply. Therefore, the public should expect that the greater the power of the politician to reward or punish the police service, the more likely the police (as an organisation) is to comply with that politician's demands. It follows that in a parliamentary system the demands made by government MPs should have more impact on public expectations of the police than the demands of opposition MPs, and ministers directly responsible for policing should have more impact than backbenchers.

A counter-argument is that it may be an agency's own behaviour which drives attitudes toward it. This is certainly plausible and is in fact in line with the arguments from public administration literature about the direct effects of accountability – oversight aims to control the way public agencies act, with a knock-on effect on public confidence in those institutions. The point of this paper is that accountability mechanisms themselves will affect public perceptions *even if* they are ineffective in changing bureaucratic behaviour – i.e. they can create an inaccurate perception of this behaviour. So, if we are interested in designing oversight mechanisms in order to change how a public agency serves and interacts with its public, it is not enough to change the institution itself from inside. The external environment is important too, which includes the accountability demands being made of that institution.

To summarise, the pilot study described here is designed to test two hypotheses:

- a) Observing the *content* of a demand that an accountability holder makes of the police will affect a respondent's expectations of police behaviour, and consequently her willingness to co-operate with the police.
- b) These effects will be stronger where the accountability holder has *greater power to reward or punish* compliance/non-compliance (assuming that the respondent has knowledge of the accountability holder's powers).

3. The context of the experiment: police accountability in Canada.

Before setting out the design of the experiment, it should be noted that much as experiments seek to test a causal mechanism in isolation from confounding environmental variables, this is much harder to achieve in the social sciences than in the physical sciences. Study participants arrive with their own past experiences and existing attitudes, and stimulus material for the experiment has to be designed so that it makes sense to those respondents. As the sample for this study was drawn from the student population at the University of British Columbia (UBC), the experimental materials reflected one of the current policing issues in Canada (namely relations between the RCMP and Aboriginal peoples) and the structure and

⁹ See Dragojlovic, 2008, for an overview of this literature and its applicability to political science.

accountability mechanisms of policing in Canada today. This section describes that context, providing a brief overview of how politicians¹⁰ oversee the police in Canada, and setting out some of sources of tension that have arisen between the police and Aboriginal communities.

In a Westminster parliamentary system such as Canada, the chain of accountability described by Strøm starts with individual officers, for whom, through the hierarchy of command, the chief of police is responsible. The chief of police reports on the performance and conduct of the entire police service to the government minister responsible for policing. The minister reports to both the legislature, (which provides the budget and may ask questions about policing) and the Prime Minister who may remove the minister. Ultimately, the entire government is judged on its performance by the electorate, so allegations of police brutality, a failure to reduce the crime rate or other aspects of police performance may become political issues which affect the way the public votes.

In Canada, this system is of course complicated by the federal system. The level of government to which the police should report is not immediately apparent, particularly as the Constitution divides the justice function between the federal and provincial governments¹¹. The chain of political accountability outlined above is replicated at each level of government. The Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), as head of the federal force¹², is accountable to Ottawa's Minister for Public Safety¹³ (RCMP, 2006a; 2004a). The RCMP's powers of arrest, search, etc are granted by Parliament's legislation as are the Commissioner's individual powers to structure and discipline the force (the RCMP Act 1985, cR-10, Parts I and IV).

Enforcing the Criminal Code in each province is the responsibility of provincial governments (as part of their power to administer justice under s. 92 of the Constitution Act 1867). To do so they can either establish their own police force, as Ontario and Québec have done, or contract with the RCMP for policing services, as British Columbia, among others, has done¹⁴ (RCMP, 2006b). Whichever option is chosen, the provincial-level structures of democratic

¹⁰ Due to limitations on the amount of time respondents had to complete experiments, the pilot study described in this paper focused on one set of accountability holders: politicians at the provincial level. Therefore, this section limits itself to describing political accountability mechanisms in Canada. The RCMP and provincial and municipal police services within Canada are also subject to a variety of other accountability holders, including the courts (both under administrative and criminal law and under the Charter of Rights and Freedom), ad hoc Commissions of Inquiry and a Commission for Public Complaints at the federal level and similar bodies in most provinces. See Morton and Withey, 1986, 10; Hogg, 2001, 962-3 and Forcese, 2002, 10 on the effect of Charter jurisprudence on policing practices; Griffiths, 2001, 14 and Mendes, 1999 for an overview of police complaints procedures in Canada and O'Rawe and Moore, 1997, 124-6, Lapkin 1999, 95, and the report of the O'Connor Commission (2006, 518-23) for critiques of both provincial and federal complaints commissions.

¹¹ The federal Parliament of Canada has legislative authority over the criminal law and criminal procedure (Constitution Act, 1867, s. 91 ss 27) whereas the provincial legislatures have legislative authority over the administration of justice (Constitution Act, 1867, s. 92 ss14).

¹² At the federal level, the RCMP's duties include preventing and investigating organized crime, terrorism, some drugs-related crimes, economic crimes and other crimes threatening Canada's territorial sovereignty and security. (RCMP, 2004a).

¹³ Paul Martin established Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (now known simply as Public Safety Canada) in 2004, modeled on the US Department of Homeland Security. Prior to this, the RCMP Commissioner reported to the federal Solicitor General.

¹⁴ The RCMP also provides policing under contract to the territories (RCMP, 2006b).

accountability are the same – policing is overseen by a provincial Minister (the Attorney General in BC’s case). This minister is responsible for ensuring that all municipalities in the province have effective policing, determining policy on overarching issues and commissioning research, which can be used to assess past police performance and to develop new strategies (Griffiths, 2001, 9).

Policing and Aboriginal communities in Canada

Dennis Forcese describes Confederation as a “socio-political experiment”, pointing to the small and fragmented population spread across vast distances without a homogenous national identity (2002, 5-6). He argues that the RCMP (and their forebears the North West Mounted Police) was an important nationalising influence, both upholding law and order and providing a potent national symbol. However, the police have considerable discretion in their everyday encounters with the public, which can of course be abused, whether through unconscious prejudice or a deliberate targeting of particular groups. James Hodgson argues that this is a particular danger in both the US and Canada, as police agencies often do not fully understand the socio-economic complexities and political outlook of the communities they serve (Hodgson, 2005, 1).

The policing of Aboriginal peoples has historically been one example of this problem in Canada. As Aboriginal communities did not consent to Confederation, they are less likely to identify with the nation-building role of the RCMP; indeed several commentators have argued that policing by the NWMP and RCMP vis a vis First Nations and Inuit peoples followed a “colonial” model (Forcese, 2002, 6; Loree, 1987, 1).

Against the background of this history there are several barriers to co-operation and mutual understanding between the police and Aboriginal communities. Firstly, Aboriginal peoples suffer socio-economic disadvantage¹⁵, which has a knock-on effect on the incidence of crime (Centre for Research and Information in Canada, 2001). Secondly, Aboriginal peoples have historically been “the recipients of poorer treatment in all segments of the criminal justice system” (Loree, 1987, 4-5) and the police are the most immediate and visible symbol of that justice system. This pattern continues to be seen in cases where police officers have abused the human rights of Aboriginal individuals, resulting in serious physical harm and, in some cases, death¹⁶. Finally, the police enforce the Canadian Criminal Code, a law which is not based on the cultures or histories of Aboriginal peoples, a situation which was exacerbated by the limited social interaction between police officers of European descent and Aboriginal communities (Loree, 1987, 84) and the RCMP’s role in the residential school system (RCMP, 2004b).

These pressures led to the First Nations Policing Policy (first developed in 1991), which provides federal and provincial/territorial funding for the self-policing of First Nation

¹⁵ The most recent figures for life expectancy show that the life expectancy for a First Nations male born in 2000 is 68.9 years (76.9 for females). This compares to 67.7 years (70.2 for females) for Inuit peoples and 77 years (82 for female) for all Canadians.

¹⁶ Examples of such cases can be found in Griffiths, 2001, 239, Tanovich, 2006, 43 and the report of the Manitoba Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, 1999.

communities. On-reserve communities may either contract with the RCMP or establish their own police service, which is answerable to a locally appointed or elected board, or band council (Solicitor General, 1996, 1-4; Assembly of First Nations/RCMP 2004; RCMP 2006b). The self-policing policy only applies to Aboriginal peoples living on reserve and to incidents which take place on reserve.

4. Methodology

The hypothesised indirect effect of accountability will be tested using experimental data collected at the Political Opinion Laboratory at the University of British Columbia (UBC). The first wave of data collection (detailed in this paper)¹⁷ took place in April 2009. Respondents volunteered their time in exchange for extra credit in their lower-level political science courses. The participants completed a computerized survey, where they were asked to read various materials and then answer questions¹⁸. This section sets out the design of the experiment, the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the advantages and limitations of using the experimental method in studies of public administration.

Experimental Design

Respondents were split into three groups, created by random assignment. Each read a newspaper article describing a debate in the BC legislative assembly about policing. The articles were fictional, but were presented to respondents as genuine (they were debriefed after the experiment). The politicians in all the articles claimed that their constituents are threatened by crime and disorder and urged the police to arrest the offenders. They also state that they will push the police to do so by using their powers to set the police budget and retain or replace the chief police officer in BC.¹⁹ The article states that these decisions are either made by the minister or voted on in the legislature and thus controlled by the majority party – in other words government ministers/Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) have the direct power to reward or punish the police service whereas opposition MLAs can only persuade the government to do so, or promise to do so as a future government. Each respondent was then asked (after reading the article) how much confidence they had in the police, whether they think the police treat all ethnic groups impartially and how likely they would be to assist the police in a variety of different situations²⁰.

¹⁷ Further waves of data collection are scheduled to take place over summer 2009 and during the 2009-10 academic year. As discussed in the concluding section of this paper, this first wave was a pilot study and the experimental design is likely to be amended in subsequent waves.

¹⁸ The survey included both this experiment and several others run by political science faculty and graduate students.

¹⁹ This simplifies the powers of the provincial government v municipal and federal governments. As the experiment is measuring the effect of *public perceptions* of the accountability process on attitudes (rather than the effect of the actual accountability structure on police behaviour – see concluding section), it does not need to re-create the more complicated reality in the stimulus materials.

²⁰ These ranged from reporting a theft or assault that they were the victim of, to reporting a theft or assault that they witnessed, to getting involved in more general police-community initiatives such as crime prevention schemes.

The articles were all exactly the same, except that:

Group A (the control group): government MLAs, including the relevant minister, urged police action against “criminals” but make no mention of ethnic groups, and did not relate policing to issues of ethnicity or ancestry.

Group B (treatment 1): government MLAs, including the relevant minister, urged police action against “criminals” who are identified as being from a First Nation reserve.

Group C (treatment 2): as for group B, except that these statements are made by opposition MLAs, including the relevant opposition critic.²¹

The study respondents

The sample for the first wave of this experiment was 132 undergraduate students, taking 100 and 200-level political science courses. As such, they were mostly aged 18-21 (87% of the sample were born between 1988 and 1990). The split between women and men was 58% : 42% respectively; the modal family income bracket was \$100,000 + (30% of respondents) and the most common ethnic groups in the sample were those of European heritage²² (38%), East Asian heritage (28%) and South Asian heritage (10%). Tables 1 and 2 provide complete data on the sample’s family income and ethnicity.

INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE.

Advantages and limitations of experiments

Experiments in laboratories have the chief advantage of permitting the researcher to control the situation in which they gather data. Ensuring that nothing varies between the control and the treatment groups except the independent variables allows valid causal claims to be made about the effect of those variables (Gerring, 2007, 151-2). Such control is achieved through standardizing the stimuli given to the respondents and the questions they are asked and by randomly assigning study participants to either control or treatment groups. This means that any differences between the respondents that might bias the results (for example prior experiences with the police, or socio-economic and demographic factors) should cancel out between the different groups. Therefore the only systematic difference between the groups is the content of demands which they observed politicians making, and whether those politicians were from the government or opposition.

An advantage of using subject pools (where respondents complete several experiments and which are run by laboratory staff) is that there is no contact between the researcher and the respondents. This means we can rule out “expectancy effects” (Rosenthal, 1966) – where the researcher communicates (usually unconsciously) to the respondents the responses they expect them to make, thus creating a bias in favour of confirming the study hypothesis.

Of course, there is a trade-off between avoiding bias and accurately interpreting a respondent’s actions and beliefs. Face to face contact gives the researcher much more information about the respondent (e.g. their body language when they give a particular response; the chance to probe an interesting answer etc). Where the researcher is looking for

²¹ See Appendix 1 for the full text of the articles.

²² This category collapses several response groups in the survey: British, Western European, Québécois/French and Eastern European. See Table 2 for the underlying data.

information that only a few people possess or which is subtle, sensitive or specialised, it may well be worth risking researcher bias in order to get richer information, to ensure exact understanding of what the respondent is saying and to judge whether they are telling the truth. This will be the case for much research in public administration. For example when one is researching the reasons for a particular policy, face to face elite interviews may be the only way to build trust with the respondent and access crucial information.

The hypotheses tested here concern mass behaviour (co-operation with the police) and mass attitudes (expectations about police behaviour). Although data which one might gather in interviews about the reasons for such behaviour or attitudes are useful, the key point for my theory is that a sufficiently large group will behave or think as I have predicted. This prediction is therefore most efficiently and reliably predicted with experimental data which has not been tainted by the researcher's expectations.

Another major limitation to experimental data is external validity – how do we know that the results we obtain in the laboratory have any bearing on what happens in the real world? As political scientists, these results are only interesting if we think that, given the same stimuli, the general public will react to the police in the way the survey respondents did. The so-called “Hawthorne” effect (people change their behaviour because they know they are being observed; Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939) could be relevant to this study. Are respondents more likely to say they will report crimes to the police when they know their responses are being recorded than they are to do so in practice? In terms of measuring the impact of accountability cues, this is not a problem. We are interested in differences *between* the control and treatment groups, and all three groups have been exposed to the Hawthorne effect. It follows that any observed *gap* in co-operation between the groups can be inferred to the causal effect of the independent variables which also exists in the wider population. What we cannot do is extrapolate the sample's *level* of police co-operation to the entire population (it is likely to be systematically higher than a demographically similar group who did not complete the experiment). The concluding section suggests ways in which real-world data can be combined with experimental data to model co-operation with the police and how this is impacted by the accountability process.

A significant threat to external validity is using a subject population which is not representative of the whole population under study. As undergraduate students, the respondents differ from the general population of Canada in terms of their maturity, cognitive skills, income levels and tendency to comply with instructions (McDermott, 2002, 37), all of which could also affect their attitudes towards the police and willingness to co-operate with them. The only way to overcome this problem in its entirety is repeat the experiment with a sample drawn from the entire population. However, given that adolescents and young adults are the most likely age group to a) come into contact with the police, b) have need of their services and c) have information that would be of the use to the police (O'Rawe and Moore, 1997, 163), the extent to which they co-operate with the police will have a significant impact on police performance. I would therefore argue that they are a particularly interesting group with which to start investigating the indirect effects of police accountability.

5. Results

The content of accountability demands

The pilot study does not provide support for the first hypothesis – namely that the content of demands made of the police affects expectations of police behaviour. A t-test comparison showed no significant difference between the control group’s confidence in the police and that of the treatment group (see Table 3). This means that seeing the police being urged to target one particular group (Aboriginal people living on a nearby reserve) did not affect respondents’ overall evaluation of how well the police performed.

The relationship between demands for racially targeted policing and confidence in the police depends on the underlying values of the respondent – i.e. if a respondent either agreed with racial targeting as a policing tactic or thought that one particular group committed a disproportionate amount of crime then an expectation that the RCMP would target Aboriginal peoples as urged might actually increase confidence in the police. Similarly, if a respondent did not have strong opinions on the subject then you would not expect such cues from accountability holders to make much difference to confidence levels.

However, for the overall argument about the indirect effect of accountability to hold, the groups *should* differ in whether they think the police will treat all ethnic groups impartially or not. Unlike the question on confidence, this item simply asks respondents how they expect police to act, rather than requiring them to evaluate that behaviour. So, regardless of a respondent’s normative stance on the issue, witnessing politicians urging the police to target Aboriginal people should have some impact on whether they think the police actually do treat all ethnic groups impartially. However, this effect did not appear – there was again no significant difference between the control group (who read about police being urged to arrest unidentified criminals) and the treatment groups (where the police were urged to arrest “criminals from the reserves” and to crack down on “Aboriginal crime”) (see Table 3). There was also no significant difference between the control and treatment groups in their likelihood to co-operate with the police in a variety of ways. This last result follows from the first two. If witnessing demands that the police do X affects neither attitudes towards the police (i.e. confidence levels) nor expectations of police behaviour (i.e. whether all ethnic groups are treated impartially) then there is no reason to think it would affect willingness to co-operate with the police.

There are two possible conclusions to be drawn from these results. The first is that they disproves the argument about the indirect effect of accountability, at least for police in Canada. The second is that there may be a more complicated process at work. Only one of the respondents in the sample identified themselves as Aboriginal (see Table 2). It may be that the scenario presented to the respondents was not sufficiently salient to have an impact on their view of the police. Logically, seeing that one group is targeted by the police should be relevant information in deciding whether the police are impartial (regardless of one’s own ethnicity). However, it could be that in practice a respondent has to feel that they are personally at risk of discrimination in order for their attitudes and expectations to shift.

This possibility should be tested before completely discounting the “content of accountability cues” hypothesis. This would require changing the stimulus materials so that the targeted group was one of the larger groups in the sample population (e.g. Europeans, East Asians or

South Asians – see Table 2). This would then allow the researcher to test whether there is an interaction effect between the respondent’s own ethnicity and the treatment effect. The new hypothesis to be tested would therefore be:

“Respondents who see an accountability holder demanding that the police target one ethnic group become less positive towards the police and less willing to co-operate with them *if they are a member of that ethnic group.*”

The powers of the accountability holder

The pilot study does provide some support for the second hypothesis. As Table 4 shows, respondents who read about opposition MLAs making demands (as opposed to government MLAs) had lower confidence levels in the police, were less likely to report a theft or assault that they witnessed and were less likely to get involved in police initiatives to reduce ethnic conflict. The size of the effects was modest. For each question respondents were asked to give their answers on a 0 to 10 scale (i.e. 11 points, with 5 as the mid-point). 0 signified “I have no confidence in the police/I would never report a crime, join a police initiative etc” and 10 signified “I am extremely confident in the police/I would definitely report a theft, join a police initiative etc”. In the group which got government cues (Groups A and B), the mean confidence level was 6.82²³ whereas in the group which got opposition cues (Group C) it was 6.34, i.e. a gap of 0.48 points on an 11 point scale²⁴. The gap in the two group’s likelihood of reporting a witnessed theft, reporting a witnessed assault and of joining a police initiative to reduce ethnic conflict were 0.58, 0.56 and 0.6 respectively²⁵.

There was no significant difference between the groups in how likely they were to report a crime where they themselves were the victim. In such cases there are obviously far higher incentives to report the crime (e.g. a need for a police report to claim on insurance and a desire to see the perpetrator punished), which appear to overwhelm the impact of beliefs about the police themselves. Indeed, all respondents were highly likely to report a theft or assault that happened to them. The mean response to the question “how likely would you be to report an assault to the police if you were the victim?” was 9.99²⁶ for groups A and B (who witnessed government demands of the police). It was 9.86 for group C, who witnessed opposition demands (see Table 4)²⁷. However, for situations where co-operation is not simply a matter of self-interest, such as reporting a crime where you have no connection with either the victim or the perpetrator, or involvement in long-term initiatives,²⁸ overall willingness to co-operate was lower (see Table 5 for mean co-operation levels for the entire sample). Without the strong drive of self-interest, responses also showed greater variation, allowing factors such as the identity of accountability holders to come into play.

Whether the accountability cues were from government or opposition MLAs had no significant impact on respondents’ expectations about police impartiality (see Table 4). There

²³ All means are given to two decimal places.

²⁴ This difference was statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

²⁵ All significant at the 90% confidence level.

²⁶ On a 0-10 point scale where 10 means “I would definitely do this.”

²⁷ Where the crime in question was theft and the respondent was the victim, these means were 9.65 for groups A and B and 9.78 for group C (see Table 4).

²⁸ Either because any benefit in terms of overall crime reduction is diffuse or because there are costs to the individual who co-operates (in terms of time, or the risk of witness intimidation).

is some dissonance between this and the significant finding on co-operating with police initiatives to reduce ethnic conflict (reported above). The insignificant results for police impartiality suggest that the findings on ethnic conflict initiatives cannot be explained by the hypothesised causal process (i.e. a racialised/non-racialised accountability cue leads a respondent to expect biased / non-biased policing and consequently being more/less willing to co-operate with the police on ethnic conflict). In other words, co-operation on such initiatives is *not* driven by expectations about police behaviour. Nor is it because the messages from the accountability holders suggested that ethnic conflict (or tension between the police and a particular group) was a problem in BC. If this was occurring, willingness to join such initiatives should differ significantly between Group A, which received no cues about ethnicity and Groups B and C which did. As Table 3 shows, this was not the case. The explanation that fits best with these results is that accountability has a more general effect than the one hypothesised. It is plausible that respondents in groups A and B note that people with power (i.e. the Attorney General and government MLAs) are scrutinising the police and that these accountability holders say they will use their powers to sanction the police if they are unhappy with performance. These respondents therefore have higher general confidence in the police than Group C, albeit without specific expectations about police behaviour. As a result they are more likely to want to help the police, even when it is not in their immediate self-interest.

6. Future research

The results of this pilot study do not support the argument that the content of a demand made by accountability holders affects public expectations of bureaucratic behaviour. It does suggest that the powers of accountability holders have some impact on the public's confidence in the agency which is being held to account, and that this in turn affects willingness to co-operate with that agency. This final section considers how further testing could be used to strengthen the internal and external validity of these findings.

Firstly, the next wave of the experiment will use stimulus material which refer to gang crime in Vancouver (the control group) and to "Asian gang crime" in Vancouver (the treatment groups). This material should be more salient to respondents recruited at UBC, both in terms of the ethnic breakdown of the sample itself and the context of recent events and news coverage in Vancouver. It will also allow me to test the interaction between the respondent's own ethnicity and the effect of reading racialised demands of the police.

Secondly, subsequent waves of the study will use samples more representative of the general population in terms of age, socio-economic status and level of education. Another point is worth noting. The respondents in this study were all taking at least one political science course at the time they completed the experiment. This group may have a more sophisticated understanding of the powers of politicians over public servants than the general population. Replicating the study with a sample where not everyone has studied politics is necessary before concluding that the wider public really does have more confidence in public servants who are overseen by powerful accountability holders. This study was also part of a wider research project looking at the relationship between accountability and policing in a range of societies, particularly ones where there is a much greater degree of ethnic conflict than in Canada. The experiment will therefore be replicated using samples from Northern Ireland

and Kosovo, where inter-group cleavages are much sharper, in order to test the generalisability of arguments about the indirect effect of accountability.

Finally, this study only examines one part of the causal process set out in Figure 1. Experimental data provides an efficient and controlled means of testing for mass effects concerning public attitudes and co-operation with the police. However, my argument is not that the indirect effects of accountability are more salient than direct effects, rather that both are important. Experimental data will therefore be combined with data from the field, examining what kinds of demands accountability holders actually make of the police and how in reality the police respond to those demands. Experimental data can also be triangulated with data on actual levels of co-operation with the police (for example by looking at reported crime and participation in police-community liaison groups). Experimental data has the advantage that all background factors were controlled, making it valid to draw causal inference, whereas field data tests whether the causal process uncovered in the laboratory appears to be happening in the wider world. Together, all of these sources of data can combine to give a complete picture of the impact of accountability on the quality of policing.

Figure 1: The hypothesised direct and indirect effects of accountability mechanisms.

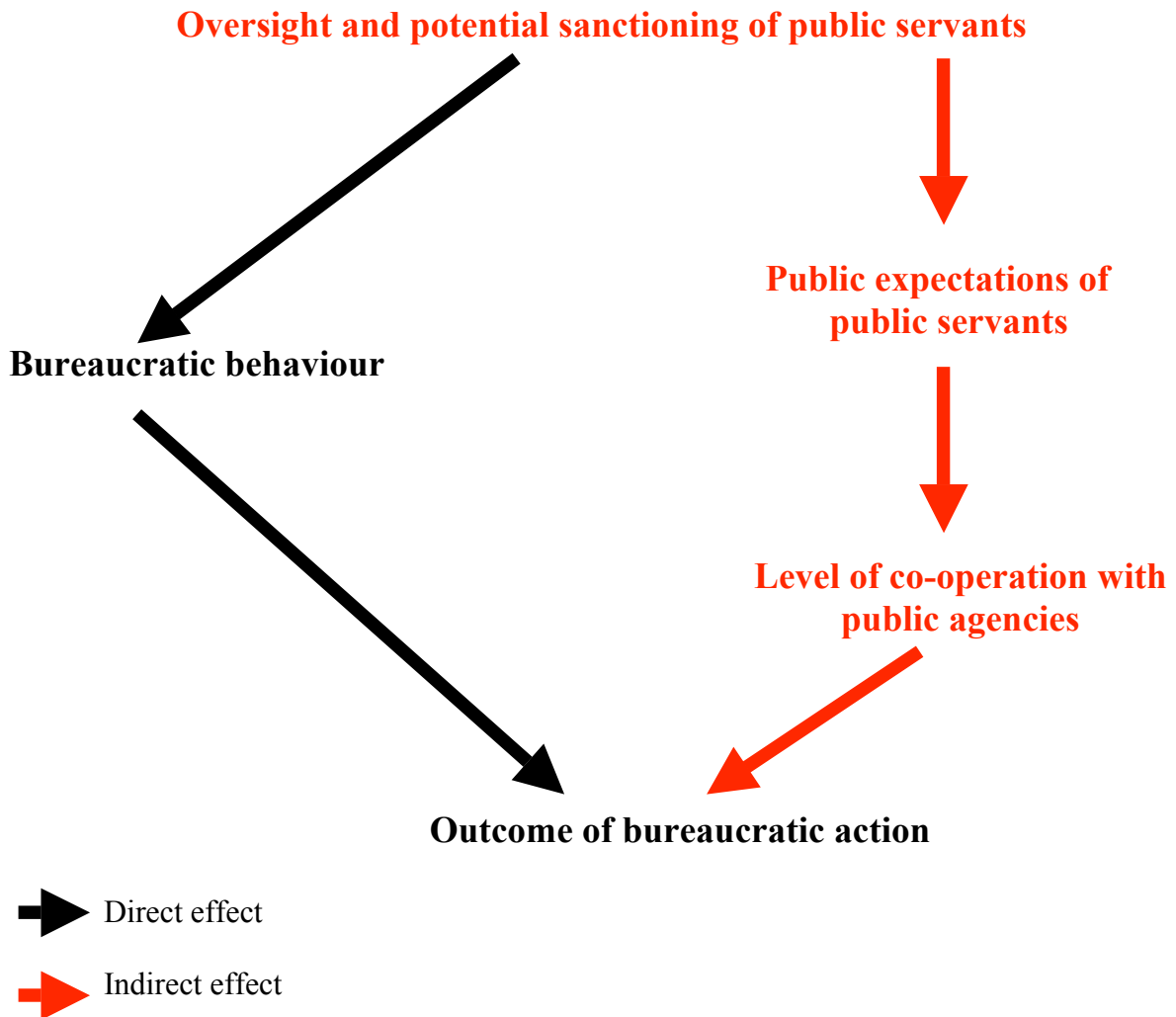


Table 1: Annual gross family income of study respondents.

Response category	Number of respondents	% of sample (to nearest 1%.)
Less than \$20,000	6	5%
Between \$20,000 and \$29,999	6	5%
Between \$30,000 and \$39,999	6	5%
Between \$40,000 and \$49,999	7	5%
Between \$50,000 and \$59,999	15	11%
Between \$60,000 and \$69,999	9	7%
Between \$70,000 and \$79,999	9	7%
Between \$80,000 and \$89,999	5	4%
Between \$90,000 and \$99,999	13	10%
\$100,000 or more	40	30%
No answer	16	12%
Total	132	100%*

Note: The instructions given to respondents for this question were:

“Please give a rough estimate of your family's total household income, before taxes for 2007. If you live with your parents or receive financial support from them, this refers to your parents' income. Include income from all sources such as savings, pensions, rent, and wages.”

* Table percentages don't total 100% due to rounding.

Table 2: Reported ethnic/cultural group of study respondents.

Response category	Number of respondents	% of sample (to nearest 1%.)
Aboriginal Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Métis)	1	1%
British (English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish)	24	18%
Western European (other than British)	14	11%
Québécois / French	3	2%
South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan)	13	10%
East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean)	37	28%
Latin American (Mexican, Central American, South American)	3	2%
African or Caribbean	1	1%
Eastern European	9	7%
American	13	10%
Other	13	10%
No answer	1	1%
Total	132	100%*

Note: The question wording was: “To what ethnic or cultural group do you belong?”

* Table percentages don't total 100% due to rounding.

Table 3: Testing the “content of accountability demands” hypothesis.

Question	Mean response: group A²⁹ (to 2 d.p.)	Mean response: groups B,C (to 2 d.p.)	Difference in means (treatment effect)³⁰ (to 2 d.p.)	p value (to 3 s.f.)	Is the difference statistically significant?
What is your level of confidence in the police? ³¹	6.57	6.67	0.10	0.394	No
Do you expect that the police are able to show impartiality towards all ethnic groups? ³²	6.24	5.88	-0.36	0.834	No
How likely would you be to report a theft to the police if you were the victim? ³³	9.57	9.76	0.19	0.288	No
How likely would you be to report an assault if you were the victim?	10.00	9.8	-0.20	0.934	No
How likely would you be to report a theft you witnessed to the police?	8.55	8.51	-0.05	0.544	No
How likely would you be to report an assault you witnessed?	9.09	8.78	-0.31	0.776	No
How likely would you be to provide the police with general information on crime/disorder patterns in your neighbourhood?	7.79	7.74	-0.05	0.539	No
How likely would you be to provide the police with information about a specific crime in	8.34	7.99	-0.35	0.801	No

²⁹ Group A read that the police were being urged to target “criminals”; for Groups B and C the target group was “Aboriginal criminals”.

³⁰ A positive difference means that the treatment (reading racialised cues) made respondents *more* confident, more likely to expect impartiality, more willing to co-operate etc. A negative difference means such cues made them *less* so.

³¹ The response scale ranged from 0 (I have no confidence) to 10 (I am extremely confident).

³² The response scale ranged from 0 (The police never treats ethnic groups impartially) to 10 (The police always treat ethnic groups impartially).

³³ The response scale for all the co-operation questions ranged from 0 (I would never do this) to 10 (I would definitely do this).

response to a media appeal?					
How likely would you be to get involved in police crime prevention initiatives?	6.26	6.28	0.03	0.473	No
How likely would you be to get involved in police initiatives to reduce ethnic conflict?	7.09	6.74	-0.35	0.784	No

Table 4: Testing the “powers of accountability holders” hypothesis.

Question	Mean response: groups A,B³⁴ (to 2 d.p.)	Mean response: group C (to 2 d.p.)	Diff in means (treatment effect)³⁵ (to 2 d.p.)	p value (to 3 s.f.)	Is the difference statistically significant?
What is your level of confidence in the police? ³⁶	6.82	6.34	0.48	0.083	Yes, at 90% confidence level
Do you expect that the police are able to show impartiality towards all ethnic groups? ³⁷	6.15	5.78	0.37	0.143	No
How likely would you be to report a theft to the police if you were the victim? ³⁸	9.65	9.78	-0.13	0.666	No
How likely would you be to report an assault if you were the victim?	9.99	9.86	0.13	0.338	No
How likely would you be to report a theft you witnessed to the police?	8.74	8.16	0.58	0.094	Yes, at 90% confidence level
How likely would you be to report an assault you witnessed?	9.10	8.54	0.56	0.099	Yes, at 90% confidence level
How likely would you be to provide the police with general information on crime/disorder patterns in your neighbourhood?	7.74	7.78	-0.04	0.531	No
How likely would you be to provide the police	8.18	8.00	0.18	0.349	No

³⁴ Groups A and B read that the police were being scrutinised by government MLAs; Group C read that they were being scrutinised by opposition MLAs.

³⁵ A positive difference means that seeing government MLAs scrutinise the police (as opposed to opposition MLAs) made respondents *more* confident, more likely to expect impartiality, more willing to co-operate etc. A negative difference means seeing government MLAs scrutinise the police made them *less* so

³⁶ The response scale ranged from 0 (I have no confidence) to 10 (I am extremely confident).

³⁷ The response scale ranged from 0 (The police never treats ethnic groups impartially) to 10 (The police always treat ethnic groups impartially).

³⁸ The response scale for all the co-operation questions ranged from 0 (I would never do this) to 10 (I would definitely do this).

with information about a specific crime in response to a media appeal?					
How likely would you be to get involved in police crime prevention initiatives?	6.32	6.20	0.12	0.395	No
How likely would you be to get involved in police initiatives to reduce ethnic conflict?	7.09	6.49	0.60	0.100	Yes, at 90% confidence level

Table 5: Respondents' willingness to co-operate with the police

Type of co-operation	Mean response of entire sample (to 2 d.p.)
Reporting a theft to the police where respondent is the victim	9.7
Reporting an assault to the police where respondent is the victim	9.8
Reporting a theft the respondent witnessed	8.52
Reporting an assault the respondent witnessed	8.89
Provide the police with general information on crime/disorder patterns in your neighbourhood	7.76
Provide the police with information about a specific crime in response to an appeal in the media	8.11
Get involved in police crime prevention initiatives	6.27
Get involved in police initiatives to reduce ethnic conflict	6.86

Note: Participants selected a response on an 11 point scale where 0 means "I would never do this" and 10 means "I would definitely do this".

Appendix 1: Stimulus material used during the pilot study.

Respondents were assigned to three groups and asked to read one of the following articles.

Control Group

BC Government Pushes RCMP on Rural Crime

The British Columbia government pressed the RCMP on rural crime yesterday, as BC MLAs held their annual debate on policing in the province. The debate came ahead of next week's vote on whether to replace the province's police chief, Gary Bass, or extend his contract for another year.

Government spokespersons called for major efforts on rural crime. "Break-ins are a real threat to my community. People there work hard for a living and they're seeing gangs and people on drugs and alcohol destroy their neighborhoods. They don't feel safe in their own homes," said one government MLA.

A government backbencher added "The police need to flood areas where the worst trouble is and make a lot of arrests. Law-abiding people want go out at night without worrying about their safety."

"My party will be using its majority to make sure Mr Bass understands that rural crime must be a top priority if he wants to keep his job," he said.

The Attorney-General said that the RCMP would receive the same message, as in other recent years, at budget time. "This government takes rural crime very seriously and we always make sure that the RCMP gets the message."

Treatment 1

BC Government Pushes RCMP on Aboriginal Crime

The British Columbia government pressed the RCMP on aboriginal crime yesterday, as BC MLAs held their annual debate on policing in the province. The debate came ahead of next week's vote on whether to replace the province's police chief, Gary Bass, or extend his contract for another year.

Government spokespersons called for major efforts on aboriginal crime. "Break-ins by criminals from the reserves are a real threat to other communities nearby. My constituents are hard-working Canadians and they're seeing gangs and people on drugs and alcohol from the reserve invade their neighbourhoods. They don't feel safe in their own homes," said one government MLA.

A government backbencher added “The police need to flood the First Nation reserve where the worst trouble is and make a lot of arrests. Law-abiding people who live near the reserve want go out at night without worrying about their safety.”

“My party will be using its majority to make sure Mr Bass understands that aboriginal crime must be a top priority if he wants to keep his job,” he said.

The Attorney-General said that the RCMP would receive the same message, as in other recent years, at budget time. “This government takes aboriginal crime very seriously and we always make sure that the RCMP gets the message.”

Treatment 2

BC Opposition Pushes RCMP on Aboriginal Crime

The British Columbia opposition pressed the RCMP on aboriginal crime yesterday, as BC MLAs held their annual debate on policing in the province. The debate came ahead of next week’s vote on whether to replace the province’s police chief, Gary Bass, or extend his contract for another year.

Opposition spokespersons called for major efforts on aboriginal crime. “Break-ins by criminals from the reserves are a real threat to other communities nearby. My constituents are hard-working Canadians and they’re seeing gangs and people on drugs and alcohol from the reserve invade their neighbourhoods. They don’t feel safe in their own homes,” said one government MLA.

An opposition backbencher added “The police need to flood the First Nation reserve where the worst trouble is and make a lot of arrests. Law-abiding people who live near the reserve want go out at night without worrying about their safety.”

“My party doesn’t have a majority to make the decision about renewing Mr Bass but we’ll make sure he understands that aboriginal crime must be a top priority,” he said.

The Opposition spokesman for the Attorney-General portfolio said that the RCMP should receive the same message at budget time. “Our party takes aboriginal crime very seriously and we will push the government to make sure that the RCMP gets the message.”

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