

**Title: Exploring the meaning of young people's attitudes towards the police. A qualitative study of Irish youth**

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## **Abstract**

Growing autonomy coupled with legal restrictions in adolescence can often mean that relationships between young people and legal authorities are problematic. Traditional approaches to this research has tended to rely on quantitative research designs, which may mean that underlying influencing factors in attitude formation unique to adolescents are not being included in such studies. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the underlying theoretical factors that influence young people's attitudes to police that may be excluded from large scale quantitative study designs. Attitudes to police were not easily classified as positive or negative and were influenced by a range of factors including, feeling stereotyped by police, lacking control during interactions and a lack of voice in dealing with the police. How police were perceived to use their power and carry out their duties were also important factors in influencing stated attitudes.

**Keywords:** police-youth relationships; procedural justice; youth justice; policing young people; qualitative; attitudes to police.

## **1. Introduction**

Much of what is known about adolescent attitudes toward police comes from quantitative research that tends to repeat the findings that young people are less likely to report satisfaction or trust in police compared to that reported for adults (Dirikx, Gelders and Parmentier, 2012; Sindall, McCarthy and Brunton-Smith, 2016). Despite the call by some authors for the use of more qualitative and exploratory research in this area in order to better understand the ‘cognitive landscapes’ of young people’s attitudes to police, qualitative investigation remains relatively rare (Liu and Crank, 2011). The small number of qualitative studies that have been undertaken have primarily focused on the attitudes of minority youth in the UK or US, or those already incarcerated (e.g. Barrett, Fletcher and Patel, 2014; Carr, Napolitano and Keating, 2007; Gau and Brunson, 2015) and report that young people hold complex, nuanced views of the police while feeling both over policed and under protected. However, this tells us little about the relationships of young people not embedded within the criminal justice system and the police, or the types of policing experienced by young people who are not potentially framed through ethnic or religious discrimination.

While much of the extant literature on young people’s attitudes toward the police has focused on determining which groups of young people have more negative attitudes, more recent research has sought to understand the reasons behind such negativity.

For example, qualitative and quantitative examinations of police use of stop and search practices show that young people are both more likely to be targeted for this type of police attention (Crawford, 2009; Gau and Brunson, 2015) and that they can have a strong effect on how the police are subsequently viewed by young people (Barrett et al., 2014; McAra and McVie, 2005).

Research has consistently shown that those with more positive attitudes to the police are more inclined to obey the law and to cooperate with police directives (Watkins and Maume, 2012), thereby reducing some of the burden on police forces in maintaining law and order. Comparative studies from a range of jurisdictions may be useful in building a more comprehensive understanding of how and why young people view the police in the ways they do and can suggest ways of improving negative relations between them and policing authorities.

The current study employed a qualitative framework to understand these issues and the factors that influence young people’s attitudes toward the police in the Republic of Ireland. Through semi structured interviews perceptions of the police were explored with reference to

evaluations of police performance, contact experiences with police and the current standing of police youth relationships. The aim of this study therefore was to explore young people's understandings of their relationships and interactions with the police and to gain a better insight into the meanings they give to the social positions they hold within these relationships.

## **2. The context of police-youth relations in Ireland**

The Children Act (2001) placed the Garda Diversion Programme on a statutory basis which aims to divert young people away from the criminal justice system, an aim restated more recently in the Youth Justice Action Plan 2014-18 (IYJS, 2014). The programme is used as an alternative to prosecution for young people under the age of 18 who admit responsibility for a criminal incident.

Latest figures show approximately three quarters of the 17,615 young people who offend each year are cautioned and/or supervised under this programme rather than being processed through the courts (Garda Síochána, 2016).

Over the past decade increasing emphasis has been placed on using alternatives to prosecution as far as possible with young people, for example by promoting restorative justice approaches (IYJS, 2013). However, concerns have been raised about the approach used in the diversion programme by other authors. In the first instance there is concern about the violation of children's rights as they are required to admit guilt before being admitted onto the programme which under other circumstances would need to be proven in court (Smyth, 2011, Walsh, 2008). Secondly, children as young as 10 years old are eligible for the programme despite the age of criminal responsibility for less serious crimes being set at 12 years old, this age limit can also include sanctions for anti-social behaviour which is not classed as a criminal offence. Thirdly, as non-admittance to the programme is usually due to the seriousness or persistence of the offending, it has been argued that those young people most in need of intervention are generally sent to court and processed through the criminal justice system (Kilkelly, 2011, McCullagh, 2006).

Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) are community-based prevention and diversion interventions that can involve multiple agencies, usually targeting disadvantaged areas with a view to diverting young people from anti-social behaviour or future criminal activity through organised activities that promote positive development and social responsibility (Garda Síochána, 2017). A major reform of GYDPs was initiated by the Irish Youth Justice Service

in 2008 which set out to align risk assessment and auditing across projects and introduced retraining for project workers and specialist Gardaí working within them (Juvenile Liaison Officers; JLOs; Swirak, 2016). In operation since 1991, GYDPs were introduced as a response to local crime and disorder in Dublin (the Irish capital), over the next decade they increased in number and location across the country. The IYJS reforms intended to coordinate practice across GYDPs, which had previously been diverse, and provide a mechanism for better accountability, effectively requiring projects to demonstrate their contribution to crime prevention and reduction (Swirak, 2016).

As in other countries, the Gardaí (police) in Ireland are afforded wide discretionary powers in dealing with young people who may be subject to a range of directives including being dispersed, stopped and searched, returned home, cautioned or arrested. There are no provisions under the Children Act (2001) or elsewhere that outline how young people should be treated in their interactions with Gardaí unless in custody. What impact these less formal interactions have on young people's attitudes are largely unknown within an Irish context. Anecdotally, attitudes towards the Garda Síochána (police force) in Ireland were thought to be generally positive, due to the small community focused nature of jurisdictions (O'Donnell, 2005). Data from the Public Attitudes Survey (PAS) would appear to support this view, with the Irish public consistently reporting high rates of trust in the Gardaí and expectations of fair and respectful treatment (Garda, 2017). Regardless, only adults are included in this survey and there are no comparable measures of young people's attitudes collected in Ireland. Likewise, comprehensive up to date data on the actions and decisions of the Gardaí are not routinely collected or published (Conway and Walsh, 2011; IYJS, 2013) making any understanding of young people's experiences of the juvenile justice system difficult to achieve. Indications of changing attitudes can however, be drawn from statistics relating to official complaints against the Garda Síochána where approximately three quarters of these come from those in the 18 to 30 years bracket and often relate to physical harm during arrest (Conway, 2008). While research has emerged from Northern Ireland over the past two decades in this area, this is situated within the context of a post-conflict society and does not lend itself to comparison with the Republic of Ireland.

A small body of Irish research carried out in the past two decades gives an indication of the relationships between young people and the Gardaí. For example, a focus group study exploring the stereotyping of young people in Ireland revealed perceptions that police show little respect towards young people (Devlin, 2006), while a second qualitative study within

disadvantaged communities found that young people can be positive about specific officers while being largely negative about the Gardaí more generally (Bowden and Higgins, 2000). In an observational study of the policing of public order offences in Dublin, a difference in the way that older and younger suspects were treated by Gardaí was noted, and this was reported to be largely dependent on the socio-economic make-up of the neighbourhood in which they were approached (National Crime Council, 2003). In 2010 a modified version of the PAS was used to assess how satisfied young people were with Gardaí compared to adults, showing satisfaction levels to be 18% lower in young people, and with the Gardaí being perceived as significantly less approachable compared to adult reports (Feeney and Freeman, 2010). More recently Ilan (2016) reported on an ethnographic study of inner city Dublin youths and Gardaí showing the ways that negative Garda attitudes toward identified groups of ‘scumbags’ affected the behaviour and attitudes of these young people in interactions with Gardaí. While Mary-Louise Corr (2014) found highly antagonistic and often violent interactions were common among young people from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds and the Gardaí. A final, qualitative, study investigated the views of Irish youth towards community Gardaí and reported that while participants were positive about their relationships with these officers such attitudes did not apply to the Gardaí as an institution or to officers outside of their local community (Gleeson and Byrne, 2016). Given the small body of literature available to assess the attitudes of Irish youth towards the police, the section below outlines the main theories discussed in the international literature to explain how attitudes to the Gardaí are formed and their influence on law abiding behaviour.

### **3. Procedural Justice and Police Legitimacy**

Scholars have described two main theoretical explanations for trust, cooperation, and compliance with the police; the instrumental perspective and the normative perspective. An instrumental perspective argues that people will cooperate with police to protect themselves from arrest or interference from the police, thereby framing their behaviour out of self-interest. In contrast a normative perspective views cooperation and compliance as developing from experiences of fair or unfair treatment from the police which impacts on an individual’s sense of social identity and belonging to society (Bradford, 2014).

The procedural justice, or normative, model argues that when people perceive their treatment by police to be fair and just they are more likely to view them as legitimate authorities who should be respected and whose directives should be followed, a concept that has been termed

a perceived obligation to obey the law (Tyler, 2006). Procedurally just interactions with police are those that involve officers treating citizens with respect, giving explanations for their decisions and, listening to the view of the citizen (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett and Tyler, 2013). The impact of experienced procedural justice, as a precursor to perceptions of legitimacy in modelling attitudes toward the police however, depends on the citizen having personal (or vicarious) contact with the police and doesn't explain how the attitudes of those with no such experience are influenced or acquired. Indeed, the composition of this model and its measurement has been the focus of some criticism in recent years.

For example, Gau (2014) has demonstrated that there are psychometric differences in experienced procedural justice from police encounters and more global beliefs about the procedural fairness of the police, and each of these have differential impacts on resulting perspectives of police legitimacy. In addition, some researchers have assessed the discriminant validity of the scales used to measure procedural justice and legitimacy and found high correlations between these constructs leading to the argument that they should be considered related but separate factors and not subscales of the same factor as they are commonly measured (e.g. Gau, 2011; Tankebe, 2013).

Nonetheless, research consistently shows that contact with the police is a defining factor in determining attitudes toward them in both adults (Liu and Crank, 2011; Maguire and Johnson, 2010) and young people (Feeney and Freeman, 2010; Gau and Brunson, 2015; Watkins and Maume, 2012). The extent to which the factors that lead to greater levels of contact with police, such as involvement in criminal behaviour or living in high crime areas, act independently to influence attitudes is less well understood or studied. The influence of procedurally just experiences with police on citizen attitudes is important in the context of research that shows links between positive views and compliance with the law generally and cooperation with police directives or orders more specifically.

A growing body of international research beyond the USA and UK has implied there may be differences across countries in the relative impact of process and instrumentally based factors and their influence on citizen's likelihood for cooperation or compliance with the police (e.g. Kaariainen and Siren, 2011; Moravcova, 2016). The treatment of some indicators of attitudes toward the police, such as satisfaction, police performance and trust, have also been examined with contrasting findings regarding their influence on beliefs about the police and behaviour in terms of compliance and cooperation (Kochel, Parks and Mastrofski, 2011). Less investigation has been conducted into the potential differences that may occur in the measurement of attitude constructs between adults and young people despite many surveys of

young people's attitudes being the same as, or marginally adapted from, those used with adults.

Whether young people hold the same *understandings* of procedural justice as adults do or if contact with police is sufficient to explain the complexity of these attitudes has been questioned.(Gau 2011; Maguire and Johnson, 2010).

Qualitative research has begun to explore this complexity and to gain a better understanding of the nuances of young people's attitudes toward the police, but to date none of this research has been undertaken with Irish youth. If policy makers and police are to develop better relationships with young people and find ways to ensure their future cooperation and assistance, then such an understanding would be a valuable step towards this.

#### **4. The Current Study**

##### ***4.1 Participants and setting***

In line with the aims of this study to investigate a broader understanding of factors affecting young people's attitudes towards police it was decided to sample participants most likely to have had interactions and experiences with Gardaí not related to criminal activity. Two youth centres in one city in the West of Ireland took part in the study, ten participants from each centre agreed to be interviewed. Four additional youth centres were invited to take part but declined due to time pressures or because young people did not wish to be interviewed. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes each, all were recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical approval for the study was granted by XXX university research ethics committee.

Broad issues addressed included; how well Gardaí are perceived to be doing their jobs; how participants felt they were perceived by Gardaí; personal and vicarious experiences with Gardaí and; perceptions of the relationship between young people and Gardaí. Sixteen out of 20 participants were male, and all were in full time second level education at the time of interview. All were aged between 12 and 18 years old, one was aged 12, four were 13, two were 14, four were 15, four were 16, three were 17 and, two were 18. Four participants had previously been cautioned for minor offences, none had been prosecuted through the courts. The participating centres (Site 1 and Site 2) differed in several ways although this was not intentional in the initial research design. Site 1, located in the city centre, was open six days a week and had an open drop-in type structure as well as timetabled classes and activities. Site 2 was located outside of the city centre in a recognised disadvantaged area. This youth centre



was open only for a few hours on specific days that included activities organised by the local Diversion Project<sup>1</sup> Garda officers. All participants from site 2 were members of the traveller community but were at the time living in ‘settled’ accommodation<sup>2</sup>. Troubled and mistrusting relationships between the traveller community and Gardaí have long been recognised (Mulcahy, 2011) and recent efforts to be more inclusive and understanding of those from ethnic minorities (including Travellers) have been made within An Garda Síochána (see O’Brien-Olinger, 2016 for research relating to immigrant populations) In addition all Garda recruits now undergo training in cultural competence. What impact this has on their day-to-day interactions with members of the traveller community however, has not been examined although Mulcahy (2011) has suggested there is a high level of mistrust and hostility between Travellers and the Gardaí

In this study, while there were obvious differences in both the backgrounds of participants and the types of youth centres they attended, data analysis showed enough general commonalities, in terms of levels of experience, perceptions of the role of Gardaí and views on fairness and effectiveness, across participants to draw inferences about young people’s broad understandings of, and attitudes toward, Gardaí that data from all participants were analysed as a complete set.

Data were analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach which stresses the need to analyse data without first imposing a theoretical framework on potential findings but also recognises the influence of existing explanations for phenomena of interest in shaping the interpretation of data and forming new theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 2009). A theoretical understanding of young people’s attitudes to police and the meanings they give to these relationships could emerge directly from the data without attempting to impose previous theoretical structures on them.

## **5. Results**

### ***5.1 The nature of police-youth relationships***

Initial views of Gardaí tended to be spontaneously negative, although when explored in greater depth they were more nuanced, and most participants expressed a desire for better relationships with Gardaí and an overarching respect for their role within society.

Perceptions of Gardaí were explained through a combination of personal and vicarious experiences, how participants believed Gardaí should (and shouldn’t) behave and, expectations of Garda behaviour in interactions with the public (and with young people in

particular). Practices such as ‘stop and search’ and being dispersed from public areas were seen as unfair and often unjustified by most participants. Some spoke about how the learned anticipation of being moved on by Gardaí affected their behaviour;

*‘...normally they [the police] just hang around and make us feel uncomfortable, so that you do move anyway’* (Interview 2, female, 15 years, site 1)

Interactions were framed as positive or negative by participants depending on what they perceived to be the motivations of the officer involved. Issues that were consistent across participants included the sense that they were being stereotyped as suspects due to their age, that they lacked a voice in interactions and that they had no control over how decisions about them were made. Despite half of participants identifying as Travellers, none referred to their own ethnic background as an explanation for their negative (or positive) experiences with Gardaí. This may have been because most interactions for this group occurred with the community Garda who was largely viewed in positive terms and most interactions were non-criminal related. As it was not an issue raised by participants themselves, ethnic/cultural background and how it influenced attitudes or experiences was not explored in depth during these interviews.

***5.2 Being stereotyped: ‘Sometimes they can just pick on teenagers like for no reason’***  
***(Interview 5, Male, 16 years, Site 1)***

Participants expressed the feeling that the Gardaí see all young people as ‘troublemakers’ and that they were often branded as such regardless of whether they had committed an offence or not. They expressed feelings of being doubly disempowered when they believed that they were suspicious merely for being young, and that any attempts to disagree with these assumptions can lead to aggressive treatment from the Gardaí. In contrast, being shown some measure of respect by the Gardaí encouraged them to be more respectful of both the police and the law more generally;

*‘...because they, [Gardaí] and the law are associated together so if you don’t like the Guards, naturally enough you’re not going to like the law, so to gain respect for them you kinda gain respect for the law.’* (Interview 5, Male, 16 years, Site 1).

While participants acknowledged in some situations there were reasons for the Gardaí to assume that they are behaving illegally, they were keen to distinguish themselves from what they viewed as ‘real criminals’, and tended to refer to their own illegal behaviour (generally underage drinking) as ‘just a bit of fun’. This also led participants to regard the actions of the Gardaí towards them as unfair and to feel that the Gardaí target them rather than attempting to solve, in their eyes, more important crimes;

*'...like, whatever you're doing, you've done it... like it's understandable the Guards are doing their job, but you'd see it, you'd see a Garda, just "empty your pockets" and you know like that, just straight off, presumed guilty towards the youth.'* (Interview 1, Male, 16 years, site 1)

Most participants discussed incidents where they avoided contact with Gardaí, or had approached encounters with them in a defensive manner, which created increasingly antagonistic interactions. While some participants referred to how their own attitudes and behaviour likely influenced the way they were treated by Gardaí, others felt that it made little difference to the outcomes of these interactions. Often young people felt that they were at a disadvantage with Gardaí who have the power to make their own '...accounts of incidents the authoritative one' (National Crime Council, 2003, p.68), a factor that the participants in this study were clearly aware of;

*'...there's no point, because if I make a complaint, they're just going to turn around and make it my fault.'* (Interview 10, Male, 18 years, Site 1)

*'...just, don't give them back cheek or something like, because then they'd give you a caution or something.'* (Interview 12, Male, 13 years, Site 2)

Most interactions with Gardaí reported here were of an informal nature and consisted of being moved on from parks, being stopped and searched, or having an informal conversation with a police officer. In some cases, young people reported being treated aggressively or violently, or in some instances seeing Gardaí acting violently towards others;

*'I've been arrested a few times and...by law they...are not allowed abuse their power...but, they do, like, for example, I got arrested and... a female Guard kept punching me constantly, in the side of the head, because, supposedly, I was resisting arrest, but I was sitting in the back of the car in handcuffs'* (Interview 10, Male, 18 years, Site 1)

This type of experience resulted in reduced trust and a reluctance to become involved with Gardaí on any level, even when they found themselves the victim of a crime, so that the participant above went on to declare that he would 'deal with it myself' rather than report a crime out of fear of a negative reaction.

A sense of resignation from some participants was evident where they felt that trying to assert themselves with Gardaí was pointless, so instead they lowered their expectations of equal treatment and found ways to shorten their interactions. In the longer term, this also incurs a reluctance to approach the Gardaí for any reason, even if they had been the victim of a crime themselves. These types of perceptions led to both a stated reduction in respect for the Gardaí and a sense that they were uninterested in assisting young people in general.

**5.3 A Lack of Control: ‘When you meet a [police officer] you’re hoping you get lucky’  
(Interview 4, Male, 16 years, Site 1)**

Lack of control over events involving interactions with Gardaí was reported by many participants. There was also a sense that while participants were aware that they have rights, they were not entirely sure what they are, putting them at a disadvantage as they felt unable to assert themselves in interactions because of this lack of knowledge.

The use of discretion on the part of different officers added to the feelings of uncertainty that young people had in interactions, finding themselves unable to predict outcomes even if they had committed an offence;

*‘..there’s times when they’ll throw you into the cab, and there’s times when they’ll just pour out your drink, so, there’s not a balance view on it, because it depends on the Garda you get, some of them will abuse their power, some of them won’t, some of them will just take a bad liking towards you and they’ll do things differently...’* (Interview 3, Male, 15 years, site 1)

Most participants lived in areas served by community officers who they had interacted with in less formal and more positive ways when compared to those Gardaí that were encountered while in the city centre, or away from their own communities. It seems also that negative experiences outweighed the more positive. This was due to young people distinguishing individual, positive interactions as being an exception and more negative experiences as the norm. This leads to a general feeling of uncertainty for young people particularly if a Garda they don’t know approaches them, and they cannot form expectations of how the interaction will play out;

*‘...with different Guards there’s different rules that will apply because they have that leeway, they can decide to arrest you, decide what to do with you, so, when you meet a Garda you’re hoping you get lucky.’* (Interview 4, Male, age 16 years, Site 1)

In this sense, there was a separation of individual officers who can be trusted, and ‘the Gardaí’ as an institution that is largely unknown and suspicious;

*‘Well, it depends what Guard you meet, you could meet some nice Gardaí, out this way they are, like, [referring to community officers] they listen to your part of the story, but then you have Guards there that won’t even look at you,...it depends what Guard you meet, that’s the way it goes’* (Interview 19, Male, 15 years, Site 2)

It is likely that the anticipation of unfair treatment that young people believe they have no control over influences the nature of the interactions between them and Gardaí and may contribute to negative and antagonistic experiences that might otherwise be at least neutral.

***5.4 A Lack of Voice: ‘Well, people my age, they don’t give you the time to talk...when they should be listening, what about, from your part of the story’ (Interview 16, Male, 17 years, site 2)***

Young people felt that they should be listened to by Gardaí and that they should be given the chance to have their ‘voice’ heard in interactions with them. Lacking voice in interactions with Gardaí was raised in relation to both reporting a crime and to instances when young people were being accused of an offence. Participants reported that this was one of the most important features of good relationships between the Gardaí and the public where ‘...if you can get a Garda to listen, he’ll get on with anyone’ (Interview 19, Male, 15 years, Site 2). For these participants when Gardaí were seen as being reasonable in their approach or treatment of young people this resulted in more positive attitudes.

In addition, some participants who had previously reported crimes stated that they felt they weren’t taken seriously and the Gardaí did little to investigate on their behalves;

*‘I was staying at a friend’s house and my bike was stolen and, when I found out the next morning, we rang and the Guards were like, “Oh yea, we’ll be up there in like five minutes”, and we stayed there all day and they didn’t show up at all.’* (Interview 1, Male, 16 years, site 1)

Experiences such as these, particularly when young people felt let down by the police force they saw as being there primarily to help people, were reported by participants to lead to a reduced sense of trust and confidence in the Gardaí more generally.

Participants linked the way they felt they were treated by Gardaí to their feelings of trust in the abilities and fairness of the Gardaí. Having the experienced not being given a voice in interactions, participants reported cynicism towards the Gardaí and a reluctance to engage with them at any level. Not only that, the young people in this study also stated that they would be unlikely to report crimes that they had witnessed to Gardaí, they would either ‘*just walk away, so I won’t get blamed*’ (Interview 15, Male, 13 years, Site 2), or they ‘*probably wouldn’t expect too much*’ (Interview 8, Female, 18 years, Site 1). These sentiments have the potential to have more long-term implications for police-citizen relationships if young people feel that their trust in the Gardaí has been eroded.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

The participants included in this study are not representative of all young people and findings should be considered in light of the small scale of this research. It is also important to be mindful that this group of young people had not been involved to any great extent with the criminal justice system and therefore their views are likely to differ from those who have more experience with the full range of sanctions, decisions and outcomes of such involvement. Nonetheless, the data presented here raises some points that are worthy of further investigation and research and may provide suggestions on how to improve relations between young people and the police.

The aim of the current study was to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that young people construct their attitudes toward police and how they understand and give meaning to the relationships between them. The existing, largely quantitative, literature has been somewhat limited in its approach by measuring single perspectives or small numbers of variables that fail to capture the complexity of these attitudes. In line with previous qualitative research, the attitudes of young people in this study cannot be easily categorised as either positive or negative and were revealed to be nuanced and influenced by the contexts in which Gardaí are encountered. The current study lends support to calls for a greater emphasis on determining which factors are relevant in affecting attitudes toward the police through a better understanding of citizen's priorities and understandings of increasingly commonly used concepts within the literature (Gau 2011; Maguire and Johnson, 2010). Findings reported here conflict with quantitative studies that have suggested that young people are disinterested or apathetic toward police by highlighting the nuances in their attitudes and the complexity of the cognitive and social processes involved in forming attitudes toward the police.

A range of factors, including feelings of being stereotyped, feeling harassed, having little or no voice in interactions and, being unable to anticipate police behaviour were influential in determining the overall attitudes of this group of young people towards the police.

Across participants direct interactions with the Gardaí were largely informal and were generally seen as both disempowering and frustrating. How interactions were interpreted depended largely on whether they were viewed as fair, unbiased and legitimate or not which aligns with previous research in the procedural justice literature (Gau and Brunson, 2015; Liu and Crank, 2011; Tyler, 2006). Further support for this theory is found in the reports from young people that they view the way police treat them to be more important in influencing their attitudes than the outcomes of any interactions. Positive experiences appeared to have

little influence on overall attitudes toward the police in this study. Participants were inclined to make distinctions between types of officers and viewed positive interactions as atypical and dependent on the approach of individual officers, as has been found in other European research (Dirikx, Gelders and Parmentier, 2012). Positive experiences may have served to further entrench negative views by offering young people a comparison of treatment by which they could judge negative interactions by.

The procedural justice perspective has been criticised in recent years for a lack of psychometric rigour in quantitative measures and an exclusive focus on direct contacts with police as a sufficient explanation for the development of positive or negative attitudes among the public (Bradford et al., 2009; Gau, 2011, Maguire and Johnson 2010). Findings from the current study suggest possible explanations for some of the conflicting findings within this literature. For participants in this study, while fair and procedurally just contact with Gardaí were seen to be important in how they viewed them overall, other factors, including perceptions of performance, feelings of being stereotyped and, being able to anticipate outcomes, were also highly relevant to the types of general opinions that were held.

When perceptions of procedural justice are measured in other studies they invariably relate to the last contact an individual had with police. However, assuming that only the most recent experiences with police will influence attitudes in positive or negative directions may not reflect the true impact of such experiences. Findings in this study may suggest that young people develop their attitudes toward Gardaí through the accumulation of interactions with police and base their views on the type of treatment they believe to be most typical, or those they can anticipate. Further longitudinal research is required to determine the true effects of single compared to multiple interactions between young people and police on long term attitudes and behaviour.

For many participants, there was a feeling that the Gardaí had preconceptions of them as young people and therefore guilty of some crime or disorder due to stereotypes held by police about them. When young people felt that they were unable to anticipate how they would be perceived or treated by the police this led to a sense of anxiety and mistrust which impacted on wider relations between young people and the police. Such feelings of uncertainty affected both the behaviour of young people within interactions with police and their interpretations of these interactions.

The impact of young people's perceptions of being stereotyped by Gardaí on their attitudes has not been considered in previous studies where measures of procedural justice and legitimacy are often the same as those used for adult samples, this is an area that requires

further investigation. It is worth noting that Dai and colleagues found that procedurally just practices by police have less influence on the attitudes of young people compared to adults (Dai, Frank and Sun, 2011). The importance of considering young people's perceptions of how authorities view them are further highlighted by reports from participants that they would be reluctant to approach the Gardaí, for example to report a crime, as they felt they would not be taken seriously.

This feeling of being stereotyped contributed to a sense of uncertainty within interactions with the Gardaí; participants stated they couldn't reasonably anticipate how they would be treated and what the outcomes would be. As a concept within the attitude literature toward the police, the potential impacts of this uncertainty have not been researched to date. Uncertainty such as this could influence how experiences with police are interpreted by young people.

Participants in this study who had reported crimes to the Gardaí also showed the most strongly negative views of police behaviour and intent. Previous studies have found that negative information about the behaviour of the police has a greater impact overall on attitudes than positive information (e.g. Bradford, Jackson and Stanko, 2009). While expectations of treatment from police were not directly measured in these studies, it is argued that such negative information influences attitudes toward the police because it challenges the expectations of the individual and forces them to reassess their views of the police in subsequent interactions.

Findings from the current study also lend support the performance perspective of attitudes towards the police. Participants were concerned with the effectiveness of the Gardaí while also showing an understanding of the challenges of police work. Young people in this study were clear in their views that the Gardaí should be able to carry out their duties in non-aggressive, fair, and unbiased ways. Perceptions of performance were situated alongside perceptions of procedural justice and legitimacy, suggesting that both concepts are equally important in determining the influences on young people's attitudes. In US based studies performance has been found to have little to no influence on attitudes to the police (e.g. Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006) contrasting with the reports from participants in this study. While the findings reported here are from a small-scale single study, they highlight the need to consider potential cross-country and cross-cultural differences in what citizens feel is important to them in their evaluations of the police and how these add meaning to their relationships with them.

Within the literature, satisfaction with the police is often measured through a series of items that ask about the perceived effectiveness of the police in stopping or investigating crime or



their ability to prevent anti-social behaviour (Liu and Crank, 2011). However, there is a need to better understand what is meant by satisfactory performance of the police by younger people as they may not give the same meanings to these terms as adults. Participants in this study viewed a satisfactory police service as one that was helpful, protective, and didn't resort to aggression or violence. It is interesting to note that none of the study participants here referred to factors such as crime rates, perceived safety or investigative skills of the Gardaí.

Some limitations of the current study need to be considered in interpreting the results found here. Firstly, while the sample size of 20 participants is considered adequate for an exploratory qualitative study it means that findings cannot be generalised to a wider population of young people. The current sample is also limited by the fact that all participants live in a single geographical area (a medium sized city in the West of Ireland) and this may have affected the levels of similarity in attitudes shown by this group, which could imply that greater variability may be found in a wider group of young people from different parts of the country. Also, without longitudinal data, it is impossible to predict the effects of the factors explored here on future law compliant or cooperative behaviour.

Half of the participants in the current study came from a marginalised community in Ireland (Travellers<sup>2</sup>) that has had historically antagonistic relations with the police (Mulcahy, 2011). Their views however, were in line with those of the other half of participants from backgrounds who traditionally show positive views of the Gardaí in Ireland (Browne, 2008; Garda, 2017). While it may have been anticipated that these two groups would present quite different attitudes toward the Gardaí, the young people from Traveller backgrounds in this study had spent most of their lives in the local community, attended the local schools and were a part of the community youth centre and had generally positive relationships with their community Garda officer. These factors combined may have meant that as a demographic group these participants experienced less overt discrimination from the Gardaí and may also have shifted attitudes towards those reported from the majority population.

As one of the most common complaints made by participants against the Gardaí was the view that younger people are continuously stereotyped as potential suspects, it would be useful to include Garda officers in future studies to determine their actual perceptions of younger people. That young people perceive themselves to be stereotyped in this way by the Gardaí may be more important to their overall attitudes toward police than the existence of such biased views. Crawford (2009) found that police officers in his UK study were often reluctant to use dispersion powers on young people as they felt they were being used only to appease

adults and not to prevent criminal activity. Young people in Crawford's study however, still regarded the use of dispersal as negative and unfairly targeting youth who had little authority to refuse such requests.

Despite its small scale, the current study offers some insight into the attitudes of young people toward the police, directions for future research and, possible changes in police practice that may facilitate improved relations with young people. A common criticism of the existing literature in this area has been its atheoretical nature (e.g. Bradford, et al., 2009; Liu and Crank, 2011; Maguire and Johnson, 2010), this study offers a step towards defining a theory that takes consideration of the unique factors that may influence young people's attitudes that are not found in studies with adults.

There is reason to encourage further qualitative research in this area to understand how these processes influence attitudes toward the police and how they relate to law compliant behaviour among the general population of young people. While much of the data described here relates to negative perceptions of police-youth relationships, there is however, reason for optimism in the current study findings. The results of this study revealed that young people held overall positive sentiments towards the concept of a police force and granted them the right to legitimate authority. This was envisioned as fair, respectful and, impartial by participants and showed they are not necessarily inclined to view the work of the police in only negative ways but could be considerably more supportive of policing if given the opportunity. To achieve this however, the police need to be made aware of the effects of their own behaviour on young people's willingness to cooperate with them. More consistent behaviour by Gardaí in their interactions with young people could also alleviate the sense of uncertainty reported by participants here, who stated that fairness and respect were more important to them than investigative ability, and lead to overall more positive experiences. There may be a need to inform and train all police officers, and not just Juvenile Liaison Officers (Swirak, 2016), in more effective ways of interacting with young people to promote greater compliance and more positive relations. Opportunities could also be taken by Gardaí to interact with young people in less formal ways, similar to that envisioned by the community policing model, that would challenge the view of young people that they are continuously stereotyped by police as 'troublemakers'. While officers may believe that their actions are productive in preventing youth crime and instilling compliance through the threat of punishment, it is clear from participants in this study and others that such practices are likely to serve only to further alienate young people and negatively affect their views of the legitimacy of the police.



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## Notes

1. In the current study, participants attended the youth club where the local Garda Youth Diversion Project ran its activities but did not necessarily take part in these activities. However, they did know the community officer running many of the activities through their use of shared space and from their own local community.
2. The Traveller community in Ireland is a traditionally nomadic minority group (granted ethnic minority status in the country within the last 12 months). As a population there are estimated to be 24,000 travellers currently living in Ireland (total population is approximately 4.5 million). ‘Settled’ travellers are those who no longer live the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the traveller community but tend to live in houses for long periods of time and children are enrolled in local schools while also maintaining some links to traveller culture.

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