POLICE STUDIES PROGRAM FOR YOUTH AT RISK: THE ROLE OF POLICE DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AND PERSONAL MORALITY IN EXPLAINING POLICE LEGITIMACY

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Abstract: This study examined a unique police studies intervention program by comparing two groups of youth-at-risk in two types of residential youth schools. The experimental group included 129 youths who had attended a police studies program, while the control group included 167 youths who had attended a different intervention program, without police studies. We hypothesized that the experimental group would have more positive perceptions of police legitimacy and distributive justice and higher levels of personal morality than the control group would. Moreover, we hypothesized that the relationship between the type of the intervention program and perceptions of police legitimacy would be explained by youths' personal morality and perceptions of police distributive justice. The study showed that the experimental group had more positive perceptions of police legitimacy and higher personal morality than did the control group, but there were no differences in perceived police distributive justice between the two groups. In addition, while personal morality partly mediated the link between the type of intervention program and perceptions of police legitimacy, perceived police distributive justice did not. Empirical and theoretical implications are discussed.

Keywords: youth at risk, police programs, police legitimacy, police distributive justice, personal morality, out-of-home care, residential schools, youth villages

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A legal socialization process may reduce the likelihood of youth being involved in delinquent behaviors and breaking the law and increase the likelihood of their having positive perceptions of the police (Trinkner & Cohn, 2014). The results of such a process intensify with age, and shape youths' understanding of legal and accepted behaviors in society, their role as law-abiding citizens, and their perception of law enforcement institutions, especially the police (Cohn et al., 2012).

Recent studies of legal socialization have pointed out that the degree to which this process succeeds is related to the individual's experiences in both legal and non-legal contexts. Legal contexts include, for example, experiences with the police in the streets or with judges in court. Non-legal contexts include settings such as home, school, and intervention programs in the community (Tyler & Trinkner, 2017). Those studies have shown that a healthy environment that provides fair, respectful, and caring contact with the police has a positive impact on youths' understanding of why they should obey the law and help the police (Wolfe et al., 2017).

This understanding is related to youths' perceptions of police legitimacy and the development of their personal morality. Police legitimacy is related to the belief that the police have the right to claim civil obedience, and that civilians should cooperate with them and help fight crime (Tyler, 2004) while personal morality is related to the individual's internal obligation to accept a specific idea or behavior as morally right or wrong (Jackson, 2018). Indeed, studies have shown that the more youth accept the police as a legitimate authority, and the more they value personal morality, the more willingness they show to help the police and avoid breaking the law (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Murphy, 2015).

Studies in criminology have shown a complex relationship between the police and at-risk youth: police interactions with youth at risk were observed to have a negative effect on both youths' perceptions of the police and their personal morality, leading to lower levels of police legitimacy; the youth at risk disobeyed the law, became less cooperative with the police, and assisted them less (Brunson, 2007; Hurst, 2007). In order to improve relations between at-risk youth and the police, policymakers use intervention programs that bring at-risk youth and the police together in a friendly and non-threatening environment (Lee et al., 2017). Studies that have examined such intervention programs have shown a positive impact on at-risk youths' perceptions of the police (Jones et al., 2015).

Despite those important studies, to the best of my knowledge no studies to date have examined the relationship between participating in such programs and youths' personal morality. Moreover, no studies have yet compared the perceptions of police distributive justice among youths have who have participated in such intervention programs with those of youths whose programs did not include police studies. Finally, no studies have examined whether personal morality and police distributive justice can mediate between participation in programs that bring youth at risk and the police together and improved perceptions of police legitimacy.

Perceived Police Legitimacy and Youth–Police Cooperation

The conflicted and tense relationship between youth at risk and the police has a negative impact on the former's legal socialization process, resulting in negative perceptions of the police and low personal morality, and in turn increasing youths' chances of involvement in criminal activities and disobeying the law (Schepers, 2017a).

Tyler (2004) defined police legitimacy as "the belief that the police have the right to claim civil obedience" and "that the citizens must cooperate" (pp. 86–87). Studies have suggested that such obedience and cooperation are motivated less by desire for reward or fear of sanctions and more by internal moral agreement with values that are conducive to the police being perceived as legitimate (e.g., Mazerolle et al., 2013). Compared to youths who consider the police illegitimate, youths who view them as legitimate place greater trust in them and are more willing to provide them with information, comply with their requests, and obey the law in general (Murphy & Cherney, 2012). Accordingly, strategies based on legitimacy have been found more effective in encouraging obedience and willingness to help the police in the long term; they are also less costly compared to strategies based on deterrence (Jackson et al., 2014).

Murphy (2015), for example, found that Australian youths' perceptions of police legitimacy and willingness to report suspicious activities and crimes were positively correlated (for other studies in Australia, see Hinds, 2007 and Murphy & Gaylor, 2010; for a Belgian example, see Dirikx & van den Bulck, 2013). Finally, Fagan and Tyler (2005) found a negative link between self-reported offending by New York youth and their perceptions of police legitimacy.

Personal Morality and Police Distributive Justice as Shaping Police Legitimacy

Recently scholars in the police legitimacy field have highlighted the important role of personal morality and perceptions of police distributive justice in promoting the legitimacy of the police (Tankebe et al., 2016; Van Damme & Pauwels, 2016).

Personal morality refers to the individual's internal obligation to accept a specific idea or behavior as morally right or wrong; the more individuals think that laws and rules match their personal morality, the more they will feel an obligation to follow them (Schepers, 2017b). Citizens will avoid criminal behavior because of their belief that the action that is forbidden is immoral; indeed, even in cases where the behavior seems to be legal, believing the behavior is immoral will inhibit it (Chrysoulakis, 2020). Conversely, when citizens believe a behavior that is prohibited by law is morally correct or at least neutral, they will tend to break the law (Wikström, 2010).

Some studies in criminology indicate that personal morality is related to both perceived police legitimacy and willingness to cooperate and assist the police: when citizens feel obliged to cooperate with the police, it is because they think that morally this is the right thing to do (Hough et al., 2010; Van Damme & Pauwels, 2016). Note that while these important studies have been conducted among young adults, to the best of my knowledge no studies have focused on youth at risk.

The distributive justice model examines whether citizens perceive that the police equitably provide a service without individual differences such as race or socioeconomic status (Tankebe et al., 2016). In their study of youth in Australia, Murphy and Gaylor (2010) showed a relationship between perceived police distributive justice and police legitimacy. Wolfe and colleagues (2016) and Sunshine and Tyler (2003) obtained similar results among adults in the United States.

Policing Youth at Risk

Policing youth at risk is one of the greatest challenges facing police forces worldwide, particularly because police practices used with members of this population have a crucial role in shaping their perceptions of police legitimacy, police procedural justice, police effectiveness, and police distributive justice (Azmy, 2020) and their personal morality (Arsino & Gold, 2006; Reysen et al., 2017), which affect their willingness to cooperate with the police (Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001; Murphy et al., 2008).

By definition, youth at risk are exposed to a variety of risk factors, including family and individual crises and mental, academic, and financial difficulties (Baglivio et al., 2014). Moreover, they tend to live in low-income and high-crime neighborhoods (Males & Brown, 2013). Combined, these factors increase the likelihood of youth turning to crime and of a conflicted relationship with the police in general (Adorjan et al., 2017). Indeed, many studies have shown that this relationship is characterized by a tendency to disrespect and abuse of power by the police; as a result, perceptions of police, and of police legitimacy in particular, are negatively affected, and this conflicted relationship discourages youths from assisting the police (Bradford et al., 2014; Nuño, 2018; Weitzer & Brunson, 2009).

Conversely, living in neighborhoods characterized by high crime rates and communal disorganization also increases the probability of falling victim to crime. Victimization has also been related to at-risk youths' evaluations of police effectiveness and personal morality: those victimized tend to feel that the police have failed to protect them, and that the police are ineffective and illegitimate and therefore do not deserve cooperation (Sargeant & Kochel, 2018; Slocum et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015). As well, victimized youth tend to morally justify deviant behavior (Doering & Baier, 2016; Medina & Rodrigues, 2019).

Intervention Programs that Bring Together Youth at Risk and Police

In attempting to heal the conflicted relationship between youth at risk and the police, intervention programs have been implemented that bring youths and police together for informal activities in a non-legal, non-threatening, friendly environment (Arter, 2006; Cohn et al., 2012). Those activities provide youth a chance to experience police officers outside the context of their official role, which is too often characterized by hostility (Ivanich & Warner, 2019; Solhjell et al., 2019); rather, they provide youth an opportunity to see the police as role models and mentors (Broaddus et al., 2013). Such intervention programs enable police officers to build a healthier relationship with youths, who in turn develop more positive attitudes towards the police and a

deeper understanding of the law (Hinds, 2009). Thus, intervention programs that bring youth at risk and the police together in a non-legal environment can be an important contribution to a healthy and positive legal socialization process that positively affects youths' personal morality and their perceptions towards the police (Tyler & Trinkner, 2017).

These intervention programs are informed by intergroup contact theory, which holds that, when two hostile social groups come into direct and positive contact, fear of the outgroup is reduced, knowledge about it increases, and negative prejudices may be replaced by empathy and mutual trust (Allport, 1954). According to Pettigrew and colleagues (2011), four conditions should be met in order to achieve these goals: social and institutional support; significant personal contacts; reduction in hierarchy and increase in equality between the two groups; and finally, a focus on promoting cooperation between the groups and creating common interests.

Despite this sound theoretical basis, the literature regarding intervention programs that bring youth at risk and the police together remains limited. Some promising evidence of their effectiveness has been reported, however. For example, a community intervention program for African American and Hispanic youth of low socioeconomic status improved youths' perceptions of the police (Jones et al., 2015; Rabois & Haaga, 2002). Leroux and McShane's (2016) study among Canadian youths showed that such a program affected their perceptions of police distributive justice, although this finding should be interpreted with caution as the study examined only one group of youths (who were not at risk) and did not include a no-program comparison group. Finally, a recent study of youth at risk who participated in police studies in an out-of-home care setting (residential school) showed that they evaluated police effectiveness, procedural justice, and legitimacy more positively than did a similar group in a different setting who received a different intervention program (Azmy, 2020). The study also showed that perceptions of police effectiveness and procedural justice mediated the relationship between program participation and perceived police legitimacy (Azmy, 2020).

Youth Villages (Residential Schools) and Police Studies Programs in Israel

Many developed countries use out-of-home intervention programs for empowering youth at risk, including boarding schools, foster care families, and residential care (Ainsworth & Thoburn, 2014). Youth are integrated in such programs in order to remove them from an unhealthy environment, often characterized by a poor, violent, abusive, dysfunctional family and a neighborhood with high poverty and crime (Brick et al., 2009). These characteristics increase the likelihood of socioemotional and educational damage to these youth and their involvement in criminal activities (Slocum et al., 2010). Ideally, out-of-home intervention settings provide protection, improved welfare, and healthy living conditions. Often, they also provide intervention programs to treat the effects of abuse and neglect and foster healthy and normative development, as well as preventing youths from taking a criminal path (O'Donnell et al., 2016).

As Attar-Schwartz (2008) stated, there are five types of out-of-home intervention program in Israel. Four types — rehabilitation, therapeutic, and post-psychiatric programs, and crisis

intervention shelters — are supervised by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs and are treatment-oriented. The fifth type — residential schools or youth villages — is the focus of the current study; it is education-oriented and supervised by the Education Ministry (Attar-Schwartz, 2008). Youth villages include youth from underprivileged backgrounds, such as migrant youth who are in the midst of their cross-cultural transition process; youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds and high-crime neighborhoods; youth who seek a second chance after having failed at or dropped out of school; and youth coping with emotional–behavioral difficulties (Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2018). The youth village is designed to create a stimulating environment with a variety of informal after-school activities and programs, including elements of emotional–behavioral treatment by social workers or psychologists (Grupper, 2013).

In 2004, one youth village developed an original program in police studies for 10th to 12th graders in collaboration with the Israel Police, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Immigration, and the Ministry of Public Security (2018). Key program elements included studies in criminology, sociology, and law enforcement; the importance of the rule of law in the democratic State of Israel; empowerment through involvement in social activities that develop leadership and initiative skills; improving attitudes towards the police; and, finally, recruiting candidates to the police as part of their mandatory service in the military (Ministry of Public Security, 2018). To achieve these goals, the program involved participants in a variety of informal police activities that brought them into contact with police, including volunteering in a neighborhood watch, visiting police stations and staying at Border Police bases, and guarding checkpoints (Ministry of Public Security, 2018).

The Current Study

Only a few studies have been published to date on police studies programs for youth at risk. To the best of my knowledge, none have examined the relationship between participating in such programs and youths' personal morality, nor have any compared the perceptions of police distributive justice of youth whose intervention programs included a police studies element with those of youth whose programs did not include that element. Finally, this study has examined whether personal morality and police distributive justice can mediate between participating in programs and perceptions of police legitimacy.

The goal of the current study is to fill this gap in the literature. The study focuses on two groups of Israeli youth at risk in youth village (out-of-home) care settings: one that participated in a police-studies program and a second that participated in a program without police studies. Specifically, the research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Youth at risk in a youth village setting who have participated in a police studies program will hold more positive perceptions of *police distributive justice* than will their peers in a different youth village setting with different intervention programs.

H2: Youth at risk in a youth village setting who have participated in a police studies program will have higher *personal morality* than will their peers in a different youth village setting with different intervention programs.

H3: Youth at risk in a youth village setting who have participated in a police studies program will perceive the police as more *legitimate* than will their peers in a different youth village setting with different intervention programs.

H4: The link between the participation of youth at risk in the police studies program and perceptions of police legitimacy will be mediated by personal morality and perceptions of police distributive justice.

Method

Procedure

We used pencil-and-paper surveys to collect data from at-risk youth (males and females) aged 14 to 18 who studied and lived in three similar out-of-home care settings: youth villages in central Israel. In order to examine the reliability of the questionnaire, I first conducted a pilot study among 36 youths who did not participate in the final study. The pilot study showed that all three dependent variables — personal morality, police distributive justice, and police legitimacy — had a minimum Cronbach's alpha of .69. The reliability of the three variables was confirmed in the analyses of the final sample as well.

Students were first told about the study by their teachers. The researcher traveled to each village and administered the questionnaire in classrooms. Before filling out the questionnaire, participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain completely anonymous. Most participants completed the questionnaire within 20 to 25 minutes.

Design and Participants

The design was quasi-experimental and cross-sectional. A total of 296 youths participated in the study; five refused without saying why. The study compared two groups from three different youth villages: one village included the experimental group of at-risk youth in the police studies program ($n = 128$), and two other youth villages comprised the control group of at-risk youth in different intervention programs ($n = 178$). All participants in the study were Jews.

Instrument

The questionnaire included items examining the following control and demographic variables: age, gender as a dummy variable, and type of contact with police. The latter variable was converted into three dummy variables: negative, between positive and negative (hereafter, "ordinary"), and positive. The variables were coded as follows: negative contact = 1 and all other types of contact = 0; ordinary contact = 1 and all other types = 0; positive contact = 1 and all other types = 0.

Finally, victimization by crime was a dummy variable (1 = was a victim; 0 = was not). The independent variable was the type of intervention program, also coded as a dummy variable (1 = police studies program; 0 = other program).

The study focused on three dependent variables: personal morality, police distributive justice, and police legitimacy, as defined in the police legitimacy literature (Hinds, 2007, 2009; Reisig et al., 2012; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Van Damme & Pauwels, 2016).

Personal morality was captured by 11 items. The respondents were asked to indicate how wrong it was to commit various antisocial activities such as " To get drunk in public places"; "Steal or try to steal an object worth more than 100 shekels"; and "Buy, sell, or hold consciously stolen goods". All items were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely okay*) to 5 (*completely wrong*). Higher scores indicated strong intrinsic moral principles. Cronbach's alpha was .83.

Police distributive justice was captured by five items that reflected participants' assessments of whether the police allocate services and outcomes equally regardless of individual differences such as race or socioeconomic position. Participants were asked, for example, whether the police "provide different services based on where people live", and "use much more force against Arabs than Jews". All items were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale was coded so that a higher score reflected higher levels of perceived police distributive justice. Cronbach's alpha was .69.

Police legitimacy was conceptualized according to Reisig et al. (2012) and Sunshine and Tyler (2003) as a combination of obligation to obey and trust and confidence in the police. The first dimension was captured in the questionnaire by two items: "I usually try to obey the law even when I think the law is unfair"; and "You should follow the police's decisions even if you do not like the way the police behave with people". The second dimension included three items: "I have confidence in the Israel Police, I trust the Israel Police"; "I respect the Israel Police"; and "If a relative or close friend falls victim to a crime, I will encourage them to call the police". The present study operationalized police legitimacy as a two-dimensional construct by combining obligation to obey and trust and confidence in the police into a single Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale was coded so that a higher score reflected higher levels of perceived police legitimacy. Cronbach's alpha was .76.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed in three steps. First, we compared the independent and dependent variables. Next, we used ordinary least squares (OLS) multivariate regressions on control variables known to be correlated with the dependent variables. Finally, we used Hayes' (2013) SPSS PROCESS Model 4 to examine mediation between variables.

To examine differences between the experimental and control groups, we first compared five background independent variables: gender, age, victimization, contact with police, and type of contact with police, using independent chi-squared tests and *t*-tests. We then compared the three dependent variables in a series of three independent *t*-tests. When we found a significant difference, we calculated Cohen's D (see Table 1).

To better understand the relationships between the police studies program and the dependent variables, we next conducted three OLS multivariate regressions on control variables known to be correlated with them. Each included three models (steps): entering the intervention program type; entering the demographic variables of gender and age; and entering the control variables of type of contact with police and victimization (Murphy, 2015; see Table 3 to 5).

Finally, to examine whether personal morality and police distributive justice would mediate the relationship between participating in the intervention programs and perceptions of police legitimacy, we used Hayes' (2013) procedure (see Figure 1).

Results

Independent *t*-tests and chi-squared tests conducted to compare the two groups' background variables produced no significant results, showing that the only difference between the two groups was the type of intervention program. Conversely, the comparison of the dependent variables did produce significant results (see Table 2). The independent *t*-tests yielded the following results. First, participants in the experimental group had a significantly higher personal morality score ($M = 3.667$, $SD = 0.691$) than participants in the control group ($M = 3.406$, $SD = 0.788$), with a medium effect size, $t(293) = 2.972$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.352$. Second, participants in the experimental group had a significantly higher police legitimacy score ($M = 3.547$, $SD = 0.899$) than participants in the control group ($M = 3.136$, $SD = 0.872$), with a medium effect size, $t(292) = 3.946$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.464$. Finally, participants in the experimental group had a significantly lower police distributive justice score ($M = 3.349$, $SD = 0.767$) than participants in the control group ($M = 3.532$, $SD = 0.782$), albeit with a small effect size, $t(292) = 2.007$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.236$.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Compression Between Background and Dependent Variables*

Variable	Police studies program				Program without police studies				t	d	χ2	df
	n	M	SE	%	n	M	SE	%				
Age	128	16.74	1.00	-	167	16.78	.90	-	-.376	-	-	-
Gender	128	-	-	-	148	-	-	-	-	-	3.938	3
Male	63	-	-	23.1%	65	-	-	23.8%	-	-	-	-
Female	61	-	-	22.3%	81	-	-	92.7%	-	-	-	-
Victimization	128	-	-	-	167	-	-	-	-	-	1.811	1
Was victim of crime	19	-	-	6.4%	35	-	-	11.9%	-	-	-	-
Wasn't victim of crime	109	-	-	36.9%	132	-	-	44.7%	-	-	-	-
Contact with police	124	-	-	-	155	-	-	-	-	-	1.148	1
Contact with police	56	-	-	20.1%	80	-	-	28.7%	-	-	-	-
No contact with police	68	-	-	24.2%	75	-	-	26.9%	-	-	-	-
Type of contact with police									-	-	-	-
Negative	21	-	-	7.1%	34	-	-	11.5%	-	-	.747	1
Ordinary	17	-	-	5.8%	19	-	-	6.4%	-	-	.245	1
Positive	19	-	-	6.4%	23	-	-	7.8%	-	-	.068	1
Personal morality	128	3.667	.691		167	3.406	.788		-2.972**	0.352	-	-
Police distributive justice	127	3.349	.767		167	3.532	.782		2.012*	0.236	-	-
Police legitimacy	127	3.547	.899		167	3.136	.872		-3.930***	0.464	-	-

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 2. *Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations for Dependent Variables for Experimental and Control Groups*

Variables	Police studies program (Experimental group)						Program without police studies (Control group)					
	1	2	3	n	M	SD	1	2	3	n	M	SD
1. Police distributive justice	-	-.013	-.193*	128	3.349	.767	-	-.034	-.088	167	3.532	.782
2. Personal morality	-.013	-	.350***	128	3.667	.691	-.034	-	.351**	167	3.406	.788
3. Police legitimacy	-.193*	.350***	-	127	3.547	.899	-.088	.351***	-	167	3.136	.872

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Tolerance tests in all three OLS multivariate regression models revealed that no independent variable was under .50, and Pearson's *r* correlation findings revealed that no correlation between the independent variables was above .70. Accordingly, multicollinearity was not a concern in the current study. The correlation matrix was created separately by group and included the three dependent variables.

In the experimental group, the results indicated no correlation between police distributive justice and personal morality ($r = -.013$, $p > .05$); weak negative correlation between police distributive justice and police legitimacy ($r = -.193$, $p < .05$); and moderate positive correlation between personal morality and police legitimacy ($r = .350$, $p < .001$).

In the control group, the results indicated no correlation between police distributive justice and personal morality ($r = -.034$, $p > .05$); no correlation between police distributive justice and police legitimacy ($r = -.088$, $p > .05$); and moderate positive correlation between personal morality and police legitimacy ($r = .351$, $p < .001$).

Predicting Personal Morality

In order to predict personal morality, a linear regression of three models (steps) was performed (see Table 3). The first model included only the type of intervention program but, although it was statistically significant ($p < .001$), it explained only a very small share of the variance in personal morality ($R^2 = .030$). The model showed that the type of intervention program ($\beta = .172$, $p < .001$) was a significant predictor of personal morality. In the second model, we added the demographic variables gender and age. The model was statistically significant ($p < .001$), but again, explained a very small share of the variance ($R^2 = .057$). The model showed that the type of intervention program ($\beta = .188$, $p < .001$) and gender ($\beta = -.167$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of personal morality. Finally, in the third model, we added the control variables type of contact with police and victimization. The model was statistically significant ($p < .001$), but explained only a small share of the variance ($R^2 = .120$). The model showed that the type of intervention program ($\beta = .166$, $p < .001$), gender ($\beta = -.122$, $p < .05$), victimization ($\beta = -.137$, $p < .05$), and negative contact with police ($\beta = -.168$, $p < .001$) were all significant predictors of personal morality.

Predicting Police Distributive Justice

In order to predict police distributive justice, a linear regression of three models (steps) was performed (see Table 4). The first model included only the type of intervention program, and was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). In the second model, we added the demographic variables gender and age; this model was also statistically insignificant ($p > .05$). Finally, in the third model we added the control variables type of contact with police and victimization. The model was statistically significant ($p < .05$), but explained only a small share of the variance in police distributive justice ($R^2 = .049$). The model showed that only negative contact with police ($\beta = .189$; $p < .001$) predicted police distributive justice.

Table 3. *Linear Regression for Personal Morality*

		Predicting personal morality				
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
Variables	ES	B (β)	ES	B (β)	ES	B (β)
Intervention program	.087	.258 (.172)**	.086	.282 (.188)**	.085	.248 (.166)**
Age	-	-	.045	.007 (.045)	.044	.015 (.019)
Gender	-	-	.086	-.250 (-.167)**	.087	-.183 (-.122)*
Victimization	-	-	-	-	.121	-.261 (-.137)*
Negative contact with police	-	-	-	-	.132	-.321 (-.168)**
Ordinary contact with police	-	-	-	-	.128	.067 (.032)
Positive contact with police	-	-	-	-	.114	-.216 (-.137)
R^2		.030		.057		.120
Adjusted R^2		.026		.047		.098
R^2 Change		.030		.028		.063
F		8.778**		5.783***		5.503***
n		290		290		290

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 4. *Linear Regression for Police Distributive Justice*

		Predicting police distributive justice				
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
Variables	ES	B (β)	ES	B (β)	ES	B (β)
Intervention program	.061	-.167 (-.106)	.092	-.166 (-.106)	.092	-.154 (-.098)
Age	-	-	.048	.048 (.058)	.048	.033 (.040)
Gender	-	-	.093	.012 (.007)	.095	-.033 (-.021)
Victimization	-	-	-	-	.124	-.089 (-.044)
Negative contact with police	-	-	-	-	.132	.378 (.189)**
Ordinary contact with police	-	-	-	-	.144	.070 (.030)
Positive contact with police	-	-	-	-	.139	-.064 (-.029)
R^2		.011		.015		.049
Adjusted R^2		.008		.004		.026
R^2 Change		.011		.003		.034
F		3.285		1.423		2.082*
n		290		290		290

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Predicting Police Legitimacy

In order to predict police legitimacy, a linear regression of three models (steps) was conducted (see Table 5). The first included only the type of intervention program, and was statistically significant ($p < .001$), but explained a very small share of the variance ($R^2 = .049$). Intervention program ($\beta = .222$, $p < .001$) was a significant predictor of police legitimacy. In the second model, we added the demographic variables gender and age. The model was found to be statistically

significant ($p < .001$), but explained a very small share of the variance ($R^2 = .53$). Only intervention program ($\beta = .228$, $p < .001$) was a significant predictor of police legitimacy. Finally, in the third model, we added the control variables type of contact with police and victimization. The model was found to be statistically significant ($p < .001$), explaining a small-to-moderate share of the variance ($R^2 = .187$). Intervention program ($\beta = .201$, $p < .001$), victimization ($\beta = -.157$, $p < .01$), negative contact with police ($\beta = -.235$, $p < .001$), ordinary contact with police ($\beta = -.115$, $p < .05$), and positive contact with police ($\beta = .147$, $p < .05$) were all found to be significant predictors of police legitimacy.

Table 5. *Linear Regressions for Police Legitimacy*

	Predicting police legitimacy					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
Variables	ES	B (β)	ES	B (β)	ES	B (β)
Intervention program	.104	.400 (.222)***	.105	.412 (.228)***	.098	.363 (.201)***
Age	-	-	.055	.011 (.012)	.052	.032 (.034)
Gender	-	-	.105	-.110 (-.061)	.101	-.029 (-.016)
Victimization	-	-	-	-	.132	-.360 (-.157)*
Negative contact with police	-	-	-	-	.132	-.360 (-.157)*
Ordinary contact with police	-	-	-	-	.154	-.311 (-.115)*
Positive contact with police	-	-	-	-	.148	.373 (.147)*
R^2		.049		.053		.187
Adjusted R^2		.046		.043		.167
R^2 Change		.049		.004		.134
F		14.852***		5.317**		9.248***
n		289		289		289

Note. From "Police studies program for at-risk youth in youth villages: Program evaluation and understanding the psychological mechanism behind participation in the program and perceptions towards police legitimacy" by A. Azmy, 2020, *Police Practice and Research*, pp.1–17 (doi:10.1080/15614263.2020.1712200).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The PROCESS Model 4 analysis (see Figure 1) revealed that type of intervention program was significantly related to personal morality; conversely, the model showed no relationship between type of intervention program and police distributive justice. Moreover, the model showed that personal morality and police distributive justice were significantly linked with police legitimacy. It also revealed that there was a direct effect of intervention program type on police legitimacy, and that the total effect of intervention program on police legitimacy was significant ($b = .41$, $SE = .10$, $p < .05$). Finally, the model showed a partial mediation effect of personal morality on police legitimacy ($b = .10$, $SE = .04$, $Z = 2.65$, $p < .001$). Conversely, the model showed no mediation effect of police distributive justice on police legitimacy ($b = .02$, $SE = .01$, $Z = 1.37$, $p > .05$).

Figure 1. *Path Diagram Explaining the Mediator Variables (Personal Morality and Police Distributive Justice) Between Type Of Intervention Program and Police Legitimacy*
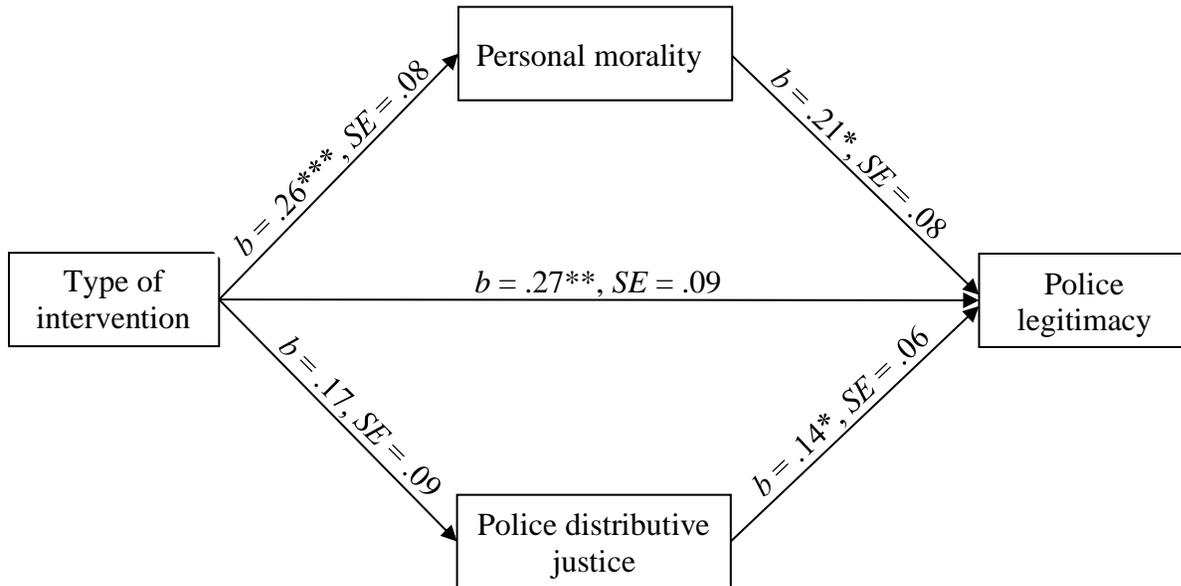
Note. N = 294; *b* = unstandardized beta coefficient of the path between variables; *SE* = standard error.
p < .05. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

Discussion

Lowering the involvement of at-risk youth in criminal behavior and cultivating positive perceptions of the police and an understanding of the need to cooperate with them can be the outcome of a healthy socialization process. This process can be directly related to either a legal context or a non-legal context. An extensive literature has focused on the legal context, examining the nature of the encounters between youth at risk and police in the streets and how the type of encounter influences youths' perceptions of the police.

The current study contributes to the literature by examining whether youth at risk who participate in a police studies program (direct contact with police in a non-legal context) would show a better understanding of why they should help the police and follow the rules (police legitimacy and personal morality) compared to youth in intervention programs without police studies, which do not bring them into direct contact with the police. In addition, the study explores the role of police distributive justice and personal morality in explaining at-risk youths' perceptions of police legitimacy.

Specifically, we hypothesized that youth at risk who participated in the police studies program would perceive police distributive justice more positively (H1), have higher personal morality (H2), and perceive the police as more legitimate (H3) than would their peers in the different intervention programs in the two other youth villages. Moreover, we hypothesized that personal

morality and police distributive justice would mediate the relationship between participation in the intervention program and perceptions of police legitimacy (H4).

The results showed a significant correlation between type of intervention program and personal morality and police legitimacy. On the other hand, no correlation was found between type of intervention program and police distributive justice. To establish a better understanding regarding the factors that explain perceptions of police legitimacy, we ran a theoretical model (see Figure 1) that indicated a direct and significant correlation between type of intervention program and perceived personal morality but no correlation between type of intervention program and police distributive justice. Moreover, the model showed a direct and significant correlation between police legitimacy and personal morality and between police legitimacy and police distributive justice. More importantly, the model indicated that personal morality partly mediated the relationship between participating in the intervention program and perceptions of police legitimacy. Therefore, H2 and H3 were supported, whereas H1 and H4 were not.

The findings indicate that taking part in a police studies program built an understanding among youth at risk that deviant behaviors were morally wrong and unacceptable. As a result of the personal morality element of the program, youth at risk came to acknowledge that the police have the right to claim civil obedience and have to be assisted in fighting crime, and that cooperating with them is based on acceptance of the values of law enforcement, rather than fear of sanctions or desire for reward.

Results regarding personal morality showed that gender and negative contact with police were negatively correlated with personal morality: specifically, males scored higher on personal morality than did females, and participants who experienced negative contact with police had lower levels of personal morality. Those differences are in line with studies that have focused on morality development. Gilligan (1982) argued that a morality of care and response, mainly linked to females, had been overlooked in favor of a morality of justice and rights, and felt this was because it was mainly men who had formulated explanations of moral development. In line with Gilligan's argument, results showed that, compared to female youth at risk, male youth at risk have a higher chance of experiencing negative police contact, including unfair and hostile treatment involving misuse of power by the police. The negative effect of such contacts on their standards of personal morality led these youngsters to regard deviant behavior as morally justified.

Another interesting finding was the negative correlation between victimization and personal morality: at-risk youth who had experienced victimization had lower personal morality scores than non-victims; accordingly, victimized participants tended to believe that deviant behavior was morally acceptable. Similarly, youth at risk who had experienced victimization had negative perceptions of the legitimacy of the police compared to non-victims, and accordingly showed low levels of trust and confidence in the police. It may be that, like most people, youth at risk initially expect the police to be effective in preventing crime, maintaining public order, and creating a sense of safety and protection. However, when youth at risk experience victimization at the hands of

police officers, or receive inadequate police assistance, they feel that the police are unable to "serve and protect". They feel let down by the police, which in turn has a negative effect on their perceptions of police legitimacy and personal morality.

Moreover, results showed that police legitimacy was found to be related to police distributive justice; in addition, there was a link between police legitimacy and all types of contact with police — positive, ordinary, and negative. This is in line with previous studies that showed citizens' views of police legitimacy and decisions about whether to cooperate with police were heavily influenced by their view of how they had been treated at the hands of police officers. Indeed, the findings showed that when participants had experienced negative or ordinary contact with police, and in cases where participants thought that the police didn't provide equal and fair service because of a citizen's race or background, the participants showed low levels of trust and confidence in the police and low levels of acceptance of and obedience to the police. Conversely, they showed high levels of trust and confidence and were more willing to agree with, accept, and obey the police when they had had positive contact with them.

Lastly, the study showed a correlation between police distributive justice and negative contact with police: when participants experienced negative treatment by the police it led them to think of the police as targeting people because of their age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. This finding is consistent with the finding that citizens' assessments of whether the police allocate services and outcomes equally and fairly regardless of individual differences such as race or socioeconomic position were heavily influenced by the way police officers treated citizens (Brunson & Weitzer, 2011: Huq, Jackson & Trinkner, 2017).

Conclusions

The results of this study are important for educators, psychologists, and police agencies who rely on intervention programs that include police studies to create a healthy socialization process that can help to reduce the likelihood of youth at risk taking part in criminal activities. The study was able to show that participating in this type of intervention program has the potential to improve levels of personal morality.

More importantly, the current study was able to examine a theoretical model that explored the role of personal morality and police distributive justice in influencing perceptions of police legitimacy among youth at risk who participated in an intervention program that brought them together with the police. The study was able to show that those participants' perceptions of the police were explained by their personal morality but not by their evaluation of police distributive justice.

The findings suggest the need for developing intervention programs in schools and in the community that bring together youth at risk and police. Moreover, it is crucial that when police officers encounter youth at risk, they attempt to establish a healthy relationship with them, as this

will enhance youths' perceptions of police legitimacy and, more importantly, contribute to their personal morality. Fostering such a healthy relationship may be applied to aspects of police procedural justice in encounters with civilians. In such an encounter, the degree to which the police treat citizens fairly and equally, with respect and dignity, and show concern for their views and arguments affects the relationship between citizens and police. Such treatment will, in turn, make it more likely that citizens will regard police authority as legitimate and will cooperate with the police, as well to shape a positive personal morality. Promoting such treatment requires a special training program for police officers, one that provides the knowledge needed to demonstrate aspects of procedural justice in their contacts with youth at risk.

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