

Direct, Vicarious, and Socialized Experiences of Police Discrimination: Predicting Perceptions of an Officer Encounter

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BACKGROUND

- Perceptions of police are shaped not only by personal encounters, but also by experiences shared within families and communities (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006).
- **Direct experiences of police discrimination** are associated with emotional reactions and negative evaluations of law enforcement, including reduced trust and increased moral outrage (Benton & Landgrave, 2024; Moody et al., 2022).
- **Vicarious experiences of police discrimination** (e.g., witnessing or hearing about biased treatment of family and friends) also shape perceptions of police legitimacy, even in the absence of direct contact (Sosoo et al., 2022).
- In parallel, **police socialization** (“the talk”) communications expectations about safety, compliance, and potential bias in police encounters, particularly among families of color (April et al., 2023; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015).
- Less is known about how these experiences jointly shape adults’ evaluations of police encounters.

HYPOTHESES

- **H1:** Direct experiences of police discrimination will be associated with **higher moral outrage and lower police legitimacy**.
- **H2:** Vicarious experiences police discrimination will be associated with **higher moral outrage and lower police legitimacy**.
- **H3:** Exposure to police socialization will be associated with **higher moral outrage and lower police legitimacy**.

METHOD

Participants

$N = 272$ Black and Latiné adults recruited from Prolific for a two-phase online study

- $M_{\text{age}} = 38.76$ (SD = 12.63)
- 51% identify as women
- 52% identify as Black

Phase 1: Baseline Measures

- **Direct Police Discrimination:** Self-reported personal experiences of police discrimination (i.e., being stopped without cause, being insulted, used excessive force).
- **Vicarious Police Discrimination:** Reported discrimination experienced by family and friends.
- **Police Socialization:** Frequency of conversations as a child about staying safe, avoiding harm, or managing potential racism in police encounters.

Phase 2: Police Encounter Evaluation

- Participants read a brief traffic-stop vignette and evaluated the police officer and police in general on multiple outcomes, including **moral outrage** (e.g., “I feel a compelling need to punish the officer”) and **police legitimacy** (e.g., “The police treat citizens with respect”).

Data Analysis

- Hierarchical regression models were conducted in two steps: Step 1 included age and gender; Step 2 added direct discrimination, vicarious discrimination, and police socialization.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

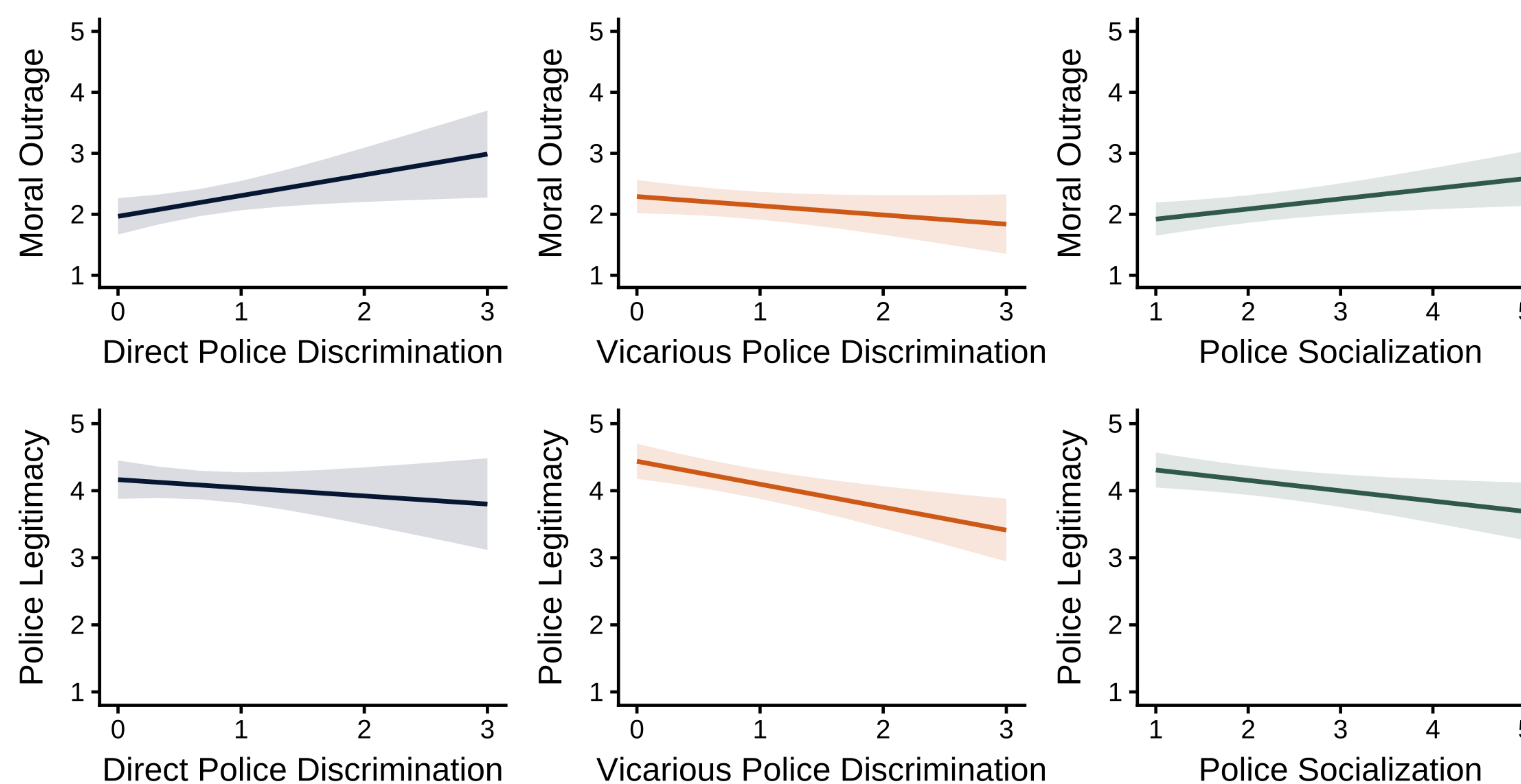
- **Direct discrimination** was most strongly associated with officer-specific moral outrage, suggesting personal mistreatment primarily shapes emotional reactions.
- **Vicarious discrimination** was most strongly associated with general police legitimacy, indicating community narratives influence broader judgments.
- **Police socialization** was associated with both greater moral outrage and lower legitimacy.
- Together, these findings suggest distinctive evaluative pathways linking lived and socialized experiences to police evaluations.

Future Research

- Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether discrimination and police socialization prospectively shape changes in moral outrage and police legitimacy.
- Experimental studies manipulating police encounters features could clarify when prior experiences are most strongly activated.
- Research including additional racial and ethnic groups is needed to assess generalizability beyond Black and Latiné adults.

RESULTS

Model-adjusted associations (95% CIs)



REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Research reported in this poster was funded by the **Burmeister Summer Research Grant** (University of Texas at El Paso, College of Liberal Arts).

- Scan for full reference list and contact information.

