

Assessing asymmetry: the life course of a research project

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This article describes the evolution of a project examining the impact of encounters on public confidence in the police. It reviews the background of the research, the central puzzle that drove the project, and the events that led to its discovery. I was surprised by my initial inability to confirm the expected relationship between encounters and confidence. Rather than encouraging confidence, encounters that people themselves rated positively did not seem to increase satisfaction with police, and for many actually made things worse. Here I discuss how I confronted this puzzle, what I concluded, and what other researchers have since done with the findings. I conclude with some notes on the research agenda implied by all of this research, and how the entire process accords with the ways in which scientific research proceeds.

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This article describes an often-unexplored feature of research, its evolution. Published reports present research in highly stylised fashion. Like fictional detective ‘procedurals’ they describe a central mystery, itemise the usual list of suspects, conclude that each of the obviously guilty could not have done it after all, and at the ‘eureka!’ moment – just prior to the section considering ‘further research’ – turn the spotlight on a new character who just entered room. Of course, the authors of best-selling procedurals do not actually write them this way; their work appears in this format because their readers expect that this is how the story line will unfold. Likewise, researchers do not actual do their work in the linear progression described by their eventual reports.

Instead, this and other articles in this special issue examine the actual research process. In the pages that follow I describe the background to the specific research project that is the centrepiece here. I report the central puzzle that drove the project, and the events that led to its discovery. I discuss how I confronted this puzzle, what I concluded, and what other researchers have since done with the findings. I conclude with some notes on the research agenda implied by what has transpired to date, and how this entire process accords with the ways in which scientific research proceeds.

The research that I report on here was published in this journal in 2006 (Skogan 2006a). It was a study of the impact of encounters with the police on public confidence. The project was one of a series I have conducted of public experiences with crime and justice. The list began in the early 1980s, when the US National Institute of Justice commissioned an evaluation of community-oriented policing

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strategies in two cities: Houston, Texas and Newark, New Jersey. A team from the Police Foundation in Washington, DC (which included me) participated in planning the programme and assessing its effectiveness in the field. The evaluation found that the then-new tactics we developed to bring police and the community closer together could increase satisfaction with the effectiveness of the police, reduce fear of crime and (in some projects) reduce victimisation. We did not know we were studying 'community policing' because that label had not yet been invented; we called it 'The Fear Reduction Project', and the first report on its effectiveness came out in 1986 (Pate *et al.* 1986). As evidence that good data can usefully be recycled, in 2009 I published an article addressing confidence issues that was based on the survey data we collected in Houston 27 years earlier (Skogan 2009).

Asymmetry in encounters

Between these two bookmarks, my 2006 report, titled 'Asymmetry in the Impact of Encounters with Police', examined an issue that is of interest to researchers and policy-makers, the impact of police encounters with the public. With some exceptions, much of the best work on the topic has appeared since about 2000. The explosion of research since that date reflects the availability of large-scale, high-quality data-sets that have been designed to address the topic, and a growing consensus on what the important unknowns are and how to analyse the data to address them. The UK has been the locus of much of the best work in this area. This is because the British Crime Survey (BCS) and data gathered in studies conducted by the Metropolitan Police Service are admirably suited for examining encounters, and there has been a policy-making community that seems actually to have cared about the results (Bradford *et al.* 2009b).

Policy-maker's interest in encounters reflects the fact that taxpayers expect good service, and, as Fleming and McLaughlin (2010, p. 199) point out, across consumer-oriented democratic societies, '[p]ublic sensibilities increasingly govern the politics of policing'. It also reflects the fraught nature of (especially) police-initiated stop-search-and-arrest contacts with the public. Furthermore, this is a research topic that promises a number of seemingly valuable policy implications, ranging from the impact of encounters on confidence to their effect on crime. The 'policy propositions' in the literature include assertions that improving the quality of encounters with the public will:

- (1) reduce unwarranted fear of crime;
- (2) build support for the police among taxpayers and voters;
- (3) encourage crime reporting and stepping forward as witnesses;
- (4) spark participation in community-policing and crime-prevention projects;
- (5) encourage compliance with police directives, and willingness to obey the law; and
- (6) underpin increasing confidence in the legitimacy of governmental institutions.

Many of these assertions are described in more detail in Hough *et al.* (2010).

A focus on encounters seems promising because they are to a significant degree in the hands of police themselves. A great deal of research on attitudes towards the police has seemingly been less promising, not because it was invalid, but because it

did not point to obvious policy levers that police managers could directly pull. Race, age and social standing are among the personal characteristics that most strongly colour people's views of the police. Neighbourhood-level factors such as concentrated poverty, social disorganisation and violent crime are also important. The views of family members and friends affect people's attitudes as well. Finally, there is doubtless a strong effect of the mass media on popular images of the police, but this is yet another factor that the police (to their frequent frustration) can do little about.

The experiences that people have with the police is another matter. Through recruitment, training, supervision and even separation, agencies can hope to ensure professionalism in their dealings with the public. To the extent to which this makes a difference in popular confidence in the police, they can hope to accomplish all of the policy propositions outlined above. Importantly, the work of Tom Tyler and others has provided both a theoretical and empirical basis for evaluating the character of police encounters with the public, to assess how effectively they are being conducted. There is an emerging checklist of the features of encounters that promise to deliver 'procedural justice' in the eyes of the community, even among those judged to have done wrong (Tyler 2007).

However, I am afraid that my contribution to this body of work has made the work of policy interpreters of research a bit harder, because what I found in my 2006 article was not good news.

The core of this study was based on surveys of the public in Chicago. The data were gathered as part of an evaluation of that city's community policing programme; the general findings are reported in Skogan (2006b). I turned to the analysis of the impact of encounters in Chicago in order to complete one chapter of the book. During the course of the survey, respondents were asked a series of 'yes-no' screening questions asking about their recent contacts with the police. When they recalled an encounter, interviewers returned later and asked follow-up questions about what happened and their perceptions of how well they were treated. Overall, 52% of Chicagoans recalled initiating an encounter with police, and 22% described being stopped by the police, in the course of a year. In the follow-up questions, big majorities recalled being well treated by police officers who paid attention to what they had to say and treated them fairly. But there was variance in these assessments, and a statistical model was developed that let me tease out the effects of contacting the police or being stopped by them, and recalling these contacts in generally positive or negative fashion, on a measure of general confidence in the police.

I found that, in Chicago, the impact of having a bad experience was 4–14 times as great as that of having a positive experience, and the effect of having a good experience – including being treated fairly and politely, and receiving service that was prompt and helpful – was not statistically different from zero. This bit of bad news was surprising to me. On the basis of two decades of looking through research on the topic, the book chapter was going to say that, if the city's community policing programme had succeeded in improving the quality of contacts with the public, this would be another factor lying behind a decade of increased confidence in the police.

But what I had found was so counter to the assumptions current in the literature that I promptly retested the findings using data from seven other cities, in three different countries. I describe this below as a 'multiple replication' research strategy. I adopted this strategy because (1) I wanted to be right, and (2) I wanted the right findings to be generalisable. They were, and worse, a review of the literature found

135 that something psychologists call ‘negativity bias’ is a pervasive cognitive phenomenon (for reviews, see Baumeister *et al.* 2001, Rosin and Royzman 2001). For a variety of reasons, people give more attention and weight to negative experiences. The lessons of bad things are learned more quickly, and bad things are forgotten more slowly. People pay more careful attention to negative experiences, and think about them and recall them later in more elaborate detail. Across many studies, 140 negative experiences have more impact on behaviour. The effects of negativity bias are very strong, it affects both humans and animals, and it appears to be innate as well as learned. Negativity bias provides a psychological foundation for possible asymmetry in the consequences of police activity on the street. Its effects can also be seen in studies of popular assessments of service providers other than the police, who 145 similarly cannot accumulate much credit by delivering good service. At the end of the article, I concluded that the take-away message was: “‘You can’t win, you can just cut your losses’”. No matter what you do, it only counts when it goes against you’ (Skogan 2006a, p. 119).

150 **Methods and measures**

An important aspect of the study was the decision to develop multiple replications of the asymmetry finding. My first analysis of the issue was confined to the data I had collected for Chicago. They pointed to strong asymmetry in the impact of encounters, and my literature review identified earlier studies, conducted in other 155 places, in which a close reading of the published analysis tables revealed the same pattern. However, reviewers and readers can be quick to point to some form of ‘Chicago exceptionalism’ when research is based there. Its police have a long – and well deserved – reputation for violence and corruption. So, perhaps Chicagoans expect the worst, and discount good service as an exception to the rule. The city is home to large minority populations and policing is deeply divided by race. My earlier analysis of the BCS (Skogan 1994) had found no apparent benefit of police visibility among Afro-Caribbeans, and perhaps this is the case for many downtrodden Chicago residents. 160

One way to address the rejoinder that my findings were limited to the particular items on a questionnaire and a particular time and place was to apply the analytic model I had developed to other people’s data from other times and places. I first rummaged around on my hard drive (an undocumented but invaluable research method), and found the data for surveys that had been conducted in Seattle and Washington DC that were based on my Chicago questionnaire. Rob Davis, then at the Vera Foundation, had translated my questionnaire into Russian, to form the basis for a survey in St. Petersburg, and he quickly volunteered the resulting data. 165 From my hard drive I also resurrected data from the 1992 BCS, which I had analysed for the Home Office (Skogan 1994). My earlier work on the BCS had greatly influenced the design of the Chicago study, so everything I had gathered so far was in a fairly compatible format with regard to the layout of the data and how things were measured. I then turned to an invaluable resource, the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), which maintains an archive of criminal justice data. The National Institute of Justice requires its grantees to submit their data to this archive, so I knew I could find well-known surveys conducted by Stephen Mastrofski and Roger Parks in two cities, Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Petersburg, 170

180 Florida.¹ Finally, Rob Davis and Joel Miller (also at Vera) donated a survey of 1800
residents of five police precincts in New York City, which I knew about because I had
read their original research report.

185 On careful study, the questions that were included in the final three surveys had
less in common with the others. However, I saw methodological variation as a
strength rather than as a weakness in my replication strategy. In this view,
‘replication’ does not just mean ‘duplication’. Solid social science findings should
be robust – yielding at least the same pattern of findings – across minor
190 methodological details as well as across common settings. Three virtual duplicates
of the Chicago survey gave me place-to-place variation; the three surveys with
notably different questionnaires would test the robustness of the asymmetry finding
to variations in how the concepts were operationalised. The fact that there were
differences in how researchers had measured the prevalence of encounters and in
how they had assessed respondents’ confidence in the police could be read as a
positive advantage – if the results were broadly similar.

195 My own surveys screened for encounters with policing using an approach which I
first helped develop for the 1992 version of the BCS. Earlier versions of the BCS
screened for contacts by location; that is, respondents were asked if they had
contacted the police by telephone, by walking into a station house, if they had
approached them on the street, and the like. The results looked a bit odd and were
200 not very useful. This approach yielded a huge number of reports of ‘saying hello’ on
the street that were not interesting or apparently consequential. Instead, I proposed
that the 1992 questionnaire shift to a lengthy list of reasons for contacting the police
(e.g. ‘to report a crime’ and ‘to report a traffic accident’) and reasons for being
approached by the police (e.g. ‘stopped or asked questions while you were on foot’).
205 Overall, there were 17 questions about self-initiated contacts, and respondents could
describe nine kinds of police-initiated encounters. After soliciting a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to
each screening question, interviewers then returned to the ‘yeses’ to gather some
details about the most recent encounter in the category. Responses to questions
asked in this format had the advantage of being interpretable and analytically useful
210 on their face, which locale-based responses were not. They also focused attention on
encounters of concern to policy-makers and the public, which friendly greetings were
really not. I adapted the 10 most frequently cited self-initiated questions and two
core police-initiated contact questions to the Chicago context.

215 The other replication data-sets that I identified varied in how closely they
matched this model for identifying encounters with police. Seattle, Washington and
St. Petersburg shared long lists of screening questions because the study directors
had not made many changes to the Chicago questionnaire’s core structure. Other
surveys included just one or two questions to capture- and police-initiated contacts.
There were also differences in the follow-up questions that they used to assess the
220 positive or negative character of the encounters which were identified. Chicago and
its close replicates shared six follow-on questions asking about citizen-initiated
contacts (e.g. ‘Did the police pay careful attention to what you had to say?’) and six
mostly identical questions assessing the quality of police-initiated encounters (items
like, ‘Did the police clearly explain why they stopped you?’). At worst, the remaining
225 studies asked a general satisfaction question about each encounter, but mostly they
included two follow-up questions.

There was also considerable variation in how the various surveys measured confidence. The Chicago study and its close replicates asked six or so questions (always single-factored) tapping 'how good a job' police were doing in preventing crime, keeping order, helping victims and responding to community concerns. From the BCS I developed a fairly similar seven-item scale measuring their perceived 'effectiveness' at a variety of largely non-enforcement tasks. The other surveys included two to four items that variously matched questions in the Chicago survey, which in turn had adopted the confidence questions I used in Houston and Newark in the early 1980s. The surveys also added questions that turned out to cluster closely with the Chicago items that they did include, such as asking 'how good a job' police did at 'promptly responding to calls for assistance' (New York City) and an overall 'how satisfied are you' question referring to 'the quality of police services in your neighborhood' (Indianapolis and St. Petersburg, Florida).

The replications replicated the Chicago pattern. There were differences in detail; for example, the Russian St. Petersburgers did not, on the whole, think much of their police, and avoided coming into contact with them when they could. On the other hand, 35% of them reported being stopped by the police, in contrast to the 6% of Florida St. Petersburgers who were stopped. In the main, however, positively rated contact had no interesting impact on general confidence, while negative contacts made things noticeably worse.

Subsequent research

The findings of the 2006 article caused a stir within the audience that pays attention to these matters. The Metropolitan Police Service had already launched a quality-of-service initiative, and to their huge credit they had initiated in parallel a continuing public satisfaction survey, under the direction of Professor Betsy Stanko. The survey was designed for monitoring the frequency and character of encounters between police and the public, and the data were quickly rolled into the asymmetry debate. In an article that also appeared in this journal, Bradford *et al.* (2009a) first replicated my original approach. They found support for its main conclusions. Then they broke up their dependent measures of confidence into components, in search of outcomes that might be responsive to good individual service. When the outcome is confidence in police effectiveness, they found (in their Table 5) that favourable and unfavourable contacts both made things worse. Net of a long list of control factors, the only good news was that positively rated contacts had only half the bad effect of bad contacts. When the confidence measure referred to perceived fairness, good self-initiated encounters had a very weak but statistically significant positive effect, good police-initiated work did not have any positive effect, and the effect of bad encounters was much more strongly bad. When the confidence measure was police engagement with the community, bad was strongly bad. Again, there was a small good effect of positive encounters that were initiated by the respondent, but no effect of positive encounters initiated by the police. Because their survey was large and expressly designed to focus on encounters, they were also able to dig deeper into the data in this article, examining issues such as the effects of police service for crime victims (which were all citizen-initiated contacts). They also found positive effects of recalling seeing police on parole, something that is already well understood by politicians, because they hear complaints from their constituents when police are not

seen around. The summary of all of this analysis emphasised a sliver of evidence for optimism, but it would have been really good to find stronger effects of positively evaluated police-initiated stops, which are a real focus of policy concern.

Further research

The subject of encounters and their consequences provides a lively topic for research. Researchers have been expanding its geographical scope, including to Africa and Asia, and the range of contacts which are investigated (see Tankebe 2010, for examples of both). The literature is burgeoning, recently calling forth an encyclopaedic summary prepared for the Home Office (Rix *et al.* 2009). In my view, one of the most important items on the confidence research agenda is coming to grips with the issue of expectations. Unlike many other of life's unexpected events, I suspect that most people have already-formed ideas about the police even before they come into contact with them. These attitudes probably have some stability, because they have diverse roots. As I noted earlier, police are a topic of everyday conversation with others, including neighbours and friends, and they may have their own experiences to relate. Many people take note of them when they see police engaged in some activity on their street, and it is hard to avoid the images of the police – real and fictional – that flash at us from the print and electronic media.

As a result, many people doubtless bring 'priors' to bear when they encounter the police, and when they later interpret what happened – both to themselves and to researchers. These prior expectations could independently colour how they view specific features of an encounter. In their review of public attitudes post Stephen Lawrence, Lloyd and Foster (2009, p. 11) concluded that '...young black men anticipate police disrespect, and this shaped their perceptions even of positive encounters'. Was a stop, or at least the reason given for it, justified? Was the outcome – say, a citation or a verbal warning – commensurate with the situation? Was the officer polite? Did it appear that the police took their complaint seriously? The way in which behaviours by the police that are associated with these questions are interpreted could easily be coloured by the mental frame imposed upon the encounter from the outset. Furthermore, it is not clear how malleable people's core attitudes about the police are in response to routine experiences. We have all encountered people whose 'minds are made up' on a topic, and their views can seem impervious to discussion or even logic. One interpretation of the 'asymmetry' finding is that there is not very much malleability in views of the police, especially when the news might seem to outside observers to be good.

One path towards untangling the impact of prior expectations would be to gather over-time or 'panel' data on individual respondents, leaving an interval between the interviews that is long enough to allow them to accumulate encounters with the police. These could be 'naturally occurring' encounters, which would result in panel respondents largely experiencing a mix of police- and self-initiated encounters of a familiar sort. A panel study might demonstrate that popular confidence is not much affected by routine events, and instead evidence a rock-hard, over-time stability in attitudes that is more rooted in race, age, gender, social standing and neighbourhood conditions, to nominate a few of the usual suspects.

A more interesting research design would field the interviews in areas experimenting with new and diverse approaches to policing. These might include

320 teams of neighbourhood officers going door to door to solicit local views regarding
neighbourhood problems, distributing newsletters, opening storefront offices, and
the like. Imposing an overlay of new police-initiated encounters on the usual mix of
responses to calls for service and traditional stops and searches would provide a
stronger test of the strength of prior expectations, because there would be more
variance in people's experiences.

325 The key feature of a panel approach to these questions is that expectations could
be measured in advance of subsequent encounters. This research design has two
strengths. One is that the time ordering of cause and effect would be clear. We would
know what people 'expect' from encounters generally, and perhaps quite specifically
for common kinds of situations, before they experience them.

330 The second strength of an over-time study is that it facilitates a strong control for
selection. As a quick glance at any data on police-public encounters will document,
they are far from randomly distributed. Contacting the police and being stopped is
'endogenous' to many other important determinants of views of the police. For
example, some individuals and households are victimisation prone, and especially
335 repeat-victimisation prone, and they contact the police frequently. Selected individuals
differentially attract the attention of the police, for reasons both bad and good;
perhaps they do not resemble the average resident of their community, or perhaps
they are bad drivers. One-wave, or cross-sectional, surveys like those employed in
most studies of confidence rely on a long list of statistical controls to 'equate'
340 (hopefully) individuals on 'all' (hopefully) of the important differences between
them, except for their encounter. In a panel study, the key control measure would be
confidence before the encounter. This needs to be done properly, which includes
correcting the pre- and post-measures for measurement error and ensuring that the
relationship between them is linear. But in the absence of randomised treatments
345 controlled by the researcher, a pre-post survey including both treated and untreated
individuals is among the strongest quasi-experimental designs.

Even more interesting would be randomised experiments in contacts with police.
With randomisation in sufficient numbers there is no pressing need for panel data or
a pre-contact interview, because the design equates the groups targeted for various
350 experiences. At the address level, strong interventions – say, visits by a team of police
officers promising to target priorities identified through door-to-door visits – could
be randomly allocated, with interviews conducted later at targeted and non-targeted
addresses in the same general areas. It would be (at least) unethical to start making
randomised stops-and-searches for research purposes, so those are unlikely to be
355 tested in this fashion, but randomising new and 'experimental' efforts to reach out to
the public certainly could be justified. A newsletter drop is a weaker, albeit cheaper,
form of police-citizen contact that can easily be randomised. Hohl *et al.* (2010)
describe a quasi-experiment along these lines. The treatment was allocated at the
area rather than individual level, with all households within the test areas receiving
360 police newsletters. Later, interviews were conducted with samples of residents of
treated and untreated areas. They found that the newsletter drop increased
confidence in police, especially on measure of their engagement with the community.
We also tried this in Houston and Newark in the mid-1980s. There, we surveyed
randomly selected residents of a target neighborhood, and then regularly mailed
365 police newsletters to randomly selected subsets of our original respondents. Alas, in
follow-up surveys that were conducted a year later, we found that hardly anyone

remembered receiving or reading our professional-looking product, and there were no differences between recipients and non-recipients in terms of satisfaction with the police, fear of crime, and our other outcome measures (Pate *et al.* 1986).

Conclusion

This article has described the research process lying behind a particular professional journal article, one that demonstrated ‘asymmetry’ in the impact of encounters with public confidence in the police. I was surprised and puzzled by my initial inability to confirm received wisdom regarding this relationship, and this led me (in part because I conveniently found some relevant data on my hard drive) to dig deeper into the puzzle. In retrospect, I believe this illustrates a very typical process by which science proceeds. In his justly famous book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn (1962) debunked the ‘normal science’ model of the day, which described scientific progress as the gradual accumulation of widely accepted fact and theory. Instead, he argued that real advances in science arise from discrepancies between new (or newly recognised) observations and accepted theory. It is anomalous findings, not confirmatory ones, that push science in more productive directions. In my field, the standard paradigm was that good service drove increased confidence in the police, especially when encounters were initiated by the public. This was neatly in accord with the emerging ‘consumerist’ perspective of taxpayers as the customers of government, and was touted as useful research advice for policy-makers. Much to my initial surprise, I think I demonstrated that the real world is more complicated. This may be because human beings are more risk adverse than logically rational (they pay excess attention to bad news), but my research could not speak to any underlying causes of asymmetry. This is where research should go next, but meanwhile, ‘cutting their losses’ by reducing the frequency of bad practice is still good advice to police managers, and still in line with what we know.

Note

1. Project on Policing Neighbourhoods in Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Petersburg, Florida, 1996–1997. ICPSR Study No. 3160. Persistent URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR03160>.

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