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Communication Accommodation: Law Enforcement and the Public

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rating of officer performance as well as satisfaction when interacting with the police. These findings suggest that more attention should be directed at developing communication skills in general and accommodative ones in particular.



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## Communication Accommodation: Law Enforcement and the Public

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### Abstract

While there is a burgeoning literature on diverse aspects of intergroup communication and some attention to media depictions of police officers and policing, very little research addresses communicative dimensions of police-civilian encounters. This is important to the extent that while it has been estimated that the vast amount of police training is devoted to physical compliance issues, 98% of actual law enforcement practice revolves around communicating with the public and its safety needs. Thus, the communication between police officers and civilians warrants examination. In this chapter, we overview the separate literatures on attitudes toward the police and communication accommodation theory. The findings of three studies are presented exploring the role of accommodation, alongside socio-demographic and other variables, in predicting attitudes toward police. The three studies encompass three different populations: English-speaking adults, Spanish-speaking adults, and university students. Analyses reveal similar results across the samples. In general, accommodation by officers predicts civilians' rating of officer performance as well as satisfaction when interacting with the police. These findings suggest that more attention should be directed at developing communication skills in general and accommodative ones in particular.

Communication accommodation: Law enforcement and the public

Although there have been forays into legal issues and communication (Danet, 1980; Lind & O'Barr, 1979), as well as into the larger arena of the relationships between power and language (Ng & Bradac, 1993), there is little sociopsychological research and theory relating to law enforcement-civilian encounters (Anderson & Giles, in press; however see, Giles, 2002; Molloy & Giles, 2002). This is in stark contrast to the burgeoning literature within the social psychology of language on the study of intergroup communication (Gudykunst, 1986; Harwood & Giles, 2005), with a particular focus on interactions between members of contrastive social categories such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age group, and able-bodied vs. physically challenged, where law enforcement-civilian interactions can arguably be cast. Given that safety and crime are repeatedly polled by the public as being amongst their greatest concerns, filling this void is an important applied quest (Culbertson, 2000) – and this research is a move in that direction.

Indeed, of all social encounters, the officer-civilian one is amongst the most visible and salient intergroup-wise. An officer's uniform and badge, together with a readily visible array of defensive weaponry, let alone the unique legal authority to use coercive force (Klockars, 1985), can make this a foreboding relationship for civilians. Add into the mix the frequent militaristic hairstyle of male officers and another layer of perceived authoritarianism is apparent (Giles, Zwang-Weissman, & Hajek, 2004).

An effective police force in a democracy requires the consent and cooperation of its citizenry (National Research Council, 2004). This legitimacy in the eyes of the public, in turn, creates a public more willing to cooperate with the police, for example, to come forward as a witness to a crime; more willing to follow police orders, for example, to disperse in a crowd

control emergency; and more likely to support the police legislatively, for example, to vote in support of a tax increase or bond measure for law enforcement (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003a). If sections of the public have formed negative images of law enforcement or differing views about what should be enforcement priorities (Beck, Boni, & Packer, 1999), collaborative efforts aimed at combating crime may, under certain conditions (Reisig & Giacomazzi, 1998), be reduced significantly or even backfire.

As mentioned above, interacting with the police is seldom a pleasant experience for many citizens (Borrero, 2001; Miller, 1999). Whether one is the victim of a crime, or a suspect, police-citizen encounters usually involve tension, anxiety, and stress (see Miller, 1999). Most individuals feel apprehensive just seeing a police officer in these common contexts: walking past a neighborhood substation, entering a restaurant where a group of officers are on their lunch break, or passing a patrol car on the highway. Certainly in a police-state, or a nation where the police are seen as corrupt and untrustworthy, a reaction of apprehension and fear of the police is expected — even healthy. In a democracy such as the USA, where, for example, sheriffs are most often democratically elected, it is problematic that people should still fear the very law enforcement officers who are sworn to protect them. Armed with an understanding of the determinants of civilian perceptions of law enforcement, training, reforms, policies and public communications can be changed to improve police – civilian relations and thus create a more effective police force. Through the program of research described here, the critical role communication (and accommodative processes in particular) plays in understanding attitudes towards law enforcement is explored.

Certainly, the media may play a role in shaping the average person's view of the police. From the early days of *Dragnet*, to the recent popularity of shows such as *NYPD Blue*, crime and

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police dramas have been a staple of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century media. In the period from 1949-1994, there were 225 individual, serialized, prime-time television shows on crime and law enforcement in the USA with as few as one airing in 1957, and as many as 15 airing simultaneously in 1994 (Perlmutter, 2000). Considering that average Americans watch up to 7 hours of television a day, they cannot help but form some degree of opinion of the police based on the heavy programming of police and law-related shows on TV. Perlmutter reports that "...cops are the most violent people on television" (p. 36) and provides detailed accounts of the dimensions upon which the media exaggerate the realities of police life. The effects of this are not only the perception of high violence, exaggerated technological capabilities, and a gross distortion of police omniscience and access to background information, but also factors such as high success in solving crimes and making arrests, as well as a lack of realism for the repetitive nature of police work. Although the former projects an inaccurate image of the police—and perhaps contributes to the perception of police as violent and temperamental—the latter is perhaps more frustrating because it creates unrealistic standards for police success, accomplishment, and power that cannot be matched in the real world.

### *Attitudes towards police*

The public's attitudes toward the police (ATP) have been studied for decades across the behavioral sciences, yet not with any real linkage to studies of language and communication. They show in the American context that peoples' opinion of the police has radically evolved from the early part of the twentieth century (Carte, 1973). In 1938, the police were not expected to represent their communities, with harsh treatment of those not native to the community being apparently acceptable. By 1971, the public wanted an active role in deciding how it's community was policed and it demanded fair treatment across all ethnic groups.

One study looking at perceptions of the police from 1972 until the end of the century concluded that, in general, most Americans have gained some confidence in and support for law enforcement officers (Ackerman et al., 2001). That said, a tenth of those surveyed had little confidence in law enforcement. Rather similarly, a study in Toronto, Canada found that 15.4 percent of those surveyed rated their interactions with law enforcement as unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory (Chow, 2002). As will be mirrored in other studies cited below, those sampled who were older, better educated, and had lived longer in the country had more positive views of the police. Yates and Pillai (1996) also found that ATP were dependent on location, age, race, ethnicity, social economic status, and education levels (see also, Colman, 1994). Populations living in urban areas view the police most negatively, followed by those in semi-rural areas, with rural populations having the most favorable images of law enforcement. Data from Washington, DC and Atlanta, Georgia, also showed geography to be critical (Parker, Onyekwuluje, & Murty , 1995); differences in marital status, income, and neighborhood crime were the greatest determinants of attitudes toward law enforcement. Community members living in high crime neighborhoods, those who were single or separated-divorced, and those with lower incomes had the worst opinions of the police.

In addition, Yates and Pillai (1996) pointed out that the public's opinion toward the police cannot be fully understood without also incorporating views toward the criminal justice system as a whole. Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, and Winfree (2001) found that Whites and Asians had the best views of police, followed by Hispanics and Native Americans, and then African Americans. These results, particularly as they relate to the last group and trust in law enforcement (Huo & Tyler, 2000; Tyler, 2001; Tyler & Huo, 2002), have been confirmed by many others (e.g., Prine, Ballard, & Robinson, 2001; Smith & Hawkins, 1973). In one 1994



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population data survey, African Americans perceived that they were treated worse by the criminal justice system, including the police (Wortley, 1996). This negative opinion was attributed to experiences during vehicle stops and actions against friends and family. Hispanics also have been found to hold poorer images of the police. A survey in Texas found that Hispanics thought officers had bad attitudes (Carter, 1985) and consequently had low expectations of police performance and believed that their race was discriminated against. Interestingly, researchers in Great Britain have more recently found that race or ethnicity was, at least at the time, not a variable affecting how the British public viewed the police (Hayes & Brewer, 1997).

Even though the attitudes of non-Caucasian racial and ethnic groups, with the exception of inner-city youth (Borrero, 2001), tend to be much less favorable than those of Caucasians, they have been slowly improving (Amoroso & Ware, 1981). Incidents in the USA, such as the Rodney King beating and the beating of two Mexican immigrants in the 1990s, however, have hampered police efforts to improve their image. Moreover, Eschholz, Sims, Blackwell, Gertz, and Chiricos (2002) have suggested that the recent diet of “reality” crime shows on American television actually “increase[s] the racial divide in attitudes towards police” (p. 327). Police contacts, whether direct or vicarious, as mediated through television shows or television news, most strongly influence the opinions that citizens of any ethnicity have towards the police (see also, Oliver, 1994; Dixon & Linz, 2000). Studies researching citizens’ perceptions and satisfaction with cops have found that those who felt they had been treated unjustly by a police officer held more negative opinions of the police overall. For instance, Griffiths and Winfree (1982) found that adolescents formed their opinions of the law enforcement based on the nature of their personal encounters with the police. Not surprisingly, Cox and White (1988) report that

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those with negative views of the police have often had negative police contacts, felt they were victims of unfair police decisions, perceived the police as verbally harassing, or believed the police spoke to them profanely: 69% of the participants in their study reported a negative police contact, 35% felt verbally abused, and 15% of their sample “perceived that the officer had directed profanity at them” (p. 120).

As a consequence of this, contact programs to better improve perceptions of the police have been in place since at least 1968. One administered to third graders used direct contact between the police and public to improve views (Derbyshire, 1968). In this study, African Americans were more influenced by the direct contact than were the Whites. Weekly interactions between police and the public have resulted in better attitudes toward the police as well as the police wanting to determine the root of problems affecting the community (Lipsitt & Steinbruner, 1969). Jones-Brown (2000) found that African American juvenile attitudes are formed by both direct and indirect interactions. With increased collaborative projects, attitudes were improved to such an extent that juveniles no longer saw the police in a purely authoritarian role.

Studies beyond the USA, such as in the literature review by Tisseyre (1976), have found that more contact with police leads to improved perceptions. That said, mere contact is not sufficient to engender good attitudes towards law enforcement in general (Hopkins & Hewstone, 1992). A British study has shown that school children formed very positive personal views of individual police officers who worked as school liaison officers in their classrooms on a daily basis. When comparing these students’ attitudes towards “police in general” with students who had no officers in their settings, however, no differences in attitudes emerged (see Brandl, Frank, & Watkins, 1997, for role of labels); in both, views of police officers in general were negative

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(Hewstone, Hopkins, & Routh, 1992). It seems as though the students subtyped and/or discounted their school's liaison officers as atypical of police *in general* – a poignant finding for devising police-adolescent contact programs (see Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Nevertheless, and apart from more long-term programs, unforeseen events have also been shown to improve attitudes toward law enforcement (Paulson, 2001). Negative images of the New York police before 9/11 were replaced with more favorable ones after officers demonstrated their bravery and dedication to the public during the terrorist attacks.

This brief review has shown that socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity correlate with ATP such that older, female, and Caucasian people report more favorable evaluations than their counterparts. Important too are the social characteristics of the *officers* being evaluated. For instance, negative attitudes are accentuated against female relative to male officers, with lower expectations held of female officers in violent situations than male officers (Koenig, 1978). As can be seen from the foregoing – communication studies of police-civilian interactions are virtually non-existent, nevertheless, what are available do *allude* to the role of communicative processes. For instance, the findings of Sunshine and Tyler (2003b) that “...people in a community cooperate with the police when they feel that the police are acting in solidarity with the community and are supporting and defending community norms in their social regulatory actions...People comply more fully with police, cooperate with them more strongly, and empower them more highly when they think the police share their moral values” (p. 162), are consistent with communication studies. To be more specific, to the extent that interactions with police are experienced as communicatively accommodating, police may engender more trust and more favorable attitudes toward them.

Communication Accommodation Theory

If, then, both vicarious media contacts and real-life, actual contacts with police are causing negative perceptions of the police, it would seem that police-citizen interactions, both vicarious and actual, largely determine citizen satisfaction. With this in mind, the studies reported below assess the satisfaction that individuals feel with the police by examining their interactions within the context of communication accommodation theory (CAT). The theory provides a wide-ranging framework aimed at predicting and explaining many of the adjustments individuals make to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction (for reviews, see Gallois & Giles, 1998; Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001; Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2004). It explores, across a wide range of organizational and other contexts (see Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991), the different ways in which people accommodate their communication, their motivations for doing so, and their consequences. Originally a sociopsychological model exploring accent and bilingual shifts in interactions (Giles, 1973; Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973), CAT has been expanded into an “interdisciplinary model of relational and identity processes in communicative interaction” (Coupland & Jaworski, 1997, p. 241-242). Although language remains a central focus of the theory, nonverbal communication behaviors, as well as other communicative aspects of identity (such as dress, hairstyles, cosmetics, etc.) can also be understood from a CAT perspective (Giles & Wadleigh, 1999).

#### *Basic principles of the theory*

- Communication is influenced not only by features of the immediate situation and participants’ initial orientations to it, but also by the socio-historical context in which the interaction is embedded. For example, an isolated encounter between any particular police officer and citizen could be marred by alleged and past hostile relations between other

members of these two groups in the neighborhood and/or on the media (as would probably be apparent for many citizens of color in the Rampart area of Los Angeles).

- Communication is not only a matter of merely exchanging information about facts, ideas, and emotions (often called referential communications), but salient social category memberships are often negotiated during an interaction through the process of accommodation. An example of this could be the decision by a bilingual, Latina police officer to use Spanish or English with other Latino citizens on her beat. Here she would be negotiating two identities: as an officer of the law and as a Latina. Her choice of language may depend on whether she wishes to emphasize a shared identity (speaking Spanish to show that she and the citizen share a common language and culture) or a discordant identity (speaking English to make salient her position as an unbiased authority).
- Interactants have expectations regarding optimal levels of accommodation. These expectations are based on stereotypes about outgroup members as well as on the prevailing social and situational norms. Calibrating the amount of non-, under-, and overaccommodating one receives can be an important ingredient in continuing or withdrawing from an interaction. If, for example, a police officer shifts from a very accommodating tone to a monotonous one when interviewing a civilian, the sudden divergence may be an indication that the officer wishes for the encounter to end and is signaling this by modifying the level of accommodation.
- Interactants use specific communication strategies (in particular, converging towards and diverging [see below] away) to signal their attitudes towards each other and their respective social groups. In this way, social interaction is a subtle balance. This could be seen in the differing levels of accommodation by a police officer towards civilians living in different

areas of his jurisdiction: the officer may be more accommodating towards one living in a low-crime, suburban neighborhood while less accommodating to another living in a higher-crime urban area—even if the terms of their interaction (say, a domestic dispute) are the same.

CAT suggests that individuals use communication, in part, in order to indicate their attitudes toward each other and, as such, it is a barometer of the level of social distance between them. This constant movement toward and away from others, by changing one's communicative behavior, is called *accommodation*. Among the different accommodative strategies that speakers use to achieve these goals, *convergence* has been the most extensively studied—and can be considered the historical core of CAT (Giles, 1973). It has been defined as a strategy whereby individuals adapt their communicative behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic (e.g., speech rate, accents), paralinguistic (e.g., pauses, utterance length), and nonverbal features (e.g., smiling, gazing) in such a way as to become more similar to their interlocutor's behavior.

An important *motive* for convergence is the desire to gain approval from one another. The premise is that of similarity attraction (Byrne, 1971): the more similar people are to their conversational partners, the more they will be liked and/or respected by these conversational partners and the more social rewards they can expect. Converging to a common linguistic style also improves the effectiveness of communication; this, in turn, has been associated with increased predictability of the other and hence a lowering of uncertainty, interpersonal anxiety, and mutual understanding (see, for example, Gudykunst, 1995). Increasing similarity in communicative behavior, such as speech rate, increases both speakers' perceived attractiveness as well as their ability to gain addressees' compliance (Buller, LePoire, Aune, & Eloy, 1992). In addition, perceiving the people one talks to as more accommodating than nonaccommodating,

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has been shown to be associated with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (Giles, McCann, Ota, & Noels, 2002). But convergence is not only rewarding, it may well entail some costs, such as the possible loss of personal or social identity.

A condition of convergence is that it should appear natural and sincere. Giles (2001) provides the example of many “bidialectal” police officers who can code-switch between empathetic (convergent) behavior and authoritative (divergent) behavior in interactions with civilians. Furthermore, he points out the need for transitions between these two styles of interaction to be smooth, otherwise “out-of-the-blue shifts toward empathy can be interpreted...as patronizing” (p. 217) and will likely fail to elicit compliance from, and possibly offend, the citizen.

Conversely, the strategy of *divergence* leads to an accentuation of speech and nonverbal differences between the self and the other. Divergence can also be an attempt to entice an interlocutor to adopt a more effective communicative stance. For example, if a victim of a crime is shouting and flustered in hysterics, a police officer may exhibit a divergent response (speaking slowly with a calm and neutral affect) in order to encourage the victim to his or her more relaxed style. That said, often the motive lying behind divergence is precisely the desire to emphasize distinctiveness from one’s interlocutor, usually on the basis of group membership, and is often a means of highlighting differing group identities through contrast. A phenomenon similar to divergence is *maintenance* whereby a person persists in his or her original style, regardless of the communicative behavior of the interlocutor (Bourhis, 1979). Compared with diverging and maintaining speakers, converging speakers are generally viewed more favorably and are perceived as both more efficient in their communication and more cooperative.

Despite a lack of any prior studies looking at accommodation in police-civilian interactions, past research into police-citizen interactions allows for the hypothesis that the influence of communication accommodation, or its absence, may have a strong place in affecting perceptions of and satisfaction with police. Miller (1999) states that routine police actions can be very stressful for ordinary citizens and believes that if officers were to behave more courteously and to afford citizens more respect, it would perhaps make the interaction less anxiety-provoking. She contests that “law enforcement currently fails police officers by encouraging them to harden themselves against emotion” (p. 32) and, therefore, causes them to be less considerate and, indeed, less accommodating. This conclusion is supported by Tuffin’s (2002) work showing high internal pressure within law enforcement agencies and a low (but increasing) expression of emotion among officers in New Zealand. Stoutland (2001) supports this in her findings that, although respect is of primary importance in determining satisfaction in dealing with the police, many participants in her study recognized that respect from the police might compromise police competency. She reports:

The issue for them was not whether or how often the police interrogated people on the street but how they treated people when they did so...[they] did not suggest that police officers should be nice to everyone all the time or treat everyone the same (pp. 248-249).

Indeed, noting the potential costs of accommodation by a police officer, Giles (2001) adds that such a communicative stance “can be dysfunctional ...under certain life-threatening circumstances” (p. 217). Nonetheless, he recognizes that this must be balanced with an officer’s ability to induce compliance and authority yet showing caring, empathy, and respect.

In light of findings such as these, others have advocated the need for law-enforcement officers to make efforts towards being more accommodating. McNamara



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(1999) advocates that policing should be based on trust and cooperation within the community, rather than approaching citizens as adversaries, while Huang, Flanagan, Longmire, and Vaughn (1996) suggest that “law enforcement agencies should consider training programs and community outreach strategies to cultivate positive perceptions during police-citizen encounters” (p. 31). More recently, Anderson, Knutson, Giles, and Arroyo (2002) report on the State of California’s Peace Officers Safety and Training (POST) Basic Academy in which officers are trained to be “courteous to all persons contacted...[to become] familiar with cultural customs of different community groups...[and to avoid] pre-judging individuals based on previous experiences...[or] appearance,” among other personal relations skills (p. 4). (maybe paraphrase this last sentence?)

### Study 1

The first of three studies was conducted in a small city in southern California, which has a police department of approximately 140 sworn officers. This department has been committed to community-oriented policing for some years and has instigated over thirty community-oriented programs (e.g., a citizen’s academy, police activities league for at-risk adolescents). The main aim of our study was to determine the community’s attitudes towards its local police force and to determine what predicted such views. Towards this end, and after extensive pilot testing with the local agency and members of the community, we devised a questionnaire in English (thus necessarily selective) that was administered personally by research assistants in all six beats of the city.<sup>2</sup> The questionnaires, filled in anonymously by people over 18 years of age, were either completed at the time of asking or picked up at an agreed time later. Interviewers were instructed to contact every third apartment or house. Relatively few members of the public

were willing to freely give their time to respond to an extensive questionnaire, on issues as sensitive as policing: the response rate was approximately 20%. It took six months to collect 766 fully completed forms. Eight items on the form related to socio-demographics and the rest related to the following content issues via 7-point rating scales: estimates of officers' educational levels; contact with, and perceived accommodativeness of, officers<sup>3</sup>; performance of and satisfaction with officers; willingness to report crimes in progress; and TV images of police (positive-negative). Open-ended questions asked what deserved praise, criticism, and improvement in officers' behavior and what was meant by the notion of "community-oriented policing."

Our sample can be characterized as: 52% female from 18-91 years with mostly an even spread across the decades; 71% Caucasian; participants lived in the city on average for 13 years (75% of which were renters); 48% had an undergraduate degree or better with incomes over \$50,000 per annum; and 46% reported having prior traffic violations. The respondents fairly well-represented the city's population in terms of gender and ethnicity and across beats. Contact with police officers (on average, informants had one or two past contacts) varied modestly across the six city beats, people claimed to be fairly willing ( $M = 5.88$ ) to report crimes in progress to the police and perceived the police to be moderately accommodating ( $M = 4.61$ ). Multivariate statistics uncovered an array of complex interactions between socio-demographics and content issues, only a few of which are of interest in this context.<sup>4</sup> For example, Caucasians (who were more educated) vis a vis all other ethnicities (mostly Latino(a)/Chicano(a)) reported more contact with local police, and females and older people claimed to be more willing to report crime than males, with age showing a linear relationship ( $p_s < .05$ ). In general and with no variance across beats of the city, ratings of and satisfaction with the local police were significantly above the

neutral mid-point ( $M = 4.88$  and  $M = 4.62$ , respectively) on 7-point scales, with males, non-Caucasians, and younger people being less positive in these regards ( $p_s < .01$ ).

As indicated above, the main objective of this study was to discover predictors of the two items, performance ratings of and satisfaction with the local police agency. Toward that end, a structural equation model was tested (see Figure 1), all paths displayed are statistically significant (at  $< .05$  or better). The model showed a good overall fit to the data ( $\chi^2(8) = 21.67, p = .006, \chi^2/df = 2.71, TLI = .99, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05$ ). Other factors were (in some instances, surprisingly) non-predictive of rating and satisfaction outcomes: gender, education, income level, number of prior violations, city beat residency, time residing in the city, amount of contact with police, and perceptions of police personnel educational levels. What Figure 1 does implicate, however, is the importance of *quality of communication*, that is, how accommodating officers are perceived to be in terms of their ability to listen to the members of the public and take into account their points of view. This predicted both performance ratings and satisfaction with the police (both of which are, not surprisingly, closely related). But of

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particular interest here is the **magnitude** of these paths from perceived accommodation to outcomes. While (greater) willingness to call the police and (increasing) age positively predicts performance ratings and satisfaction with the police respectively, the coefficients are considerably smaller. As Figure 1 also shows, willingness to call the police and age both predict and are predictive of perceived accommodation while Non-Caucasians are less likely to call the police and are less likely to see the police as accommodating. Interestingly enough then,

ethnicity and age do not directly predict performance ratings (although age is related to general satisfaction with police) but, rather, work indirectly through perceived accommodation.

These data then do underscore the critical role of perceptions of police officers' behavior with the public in shaping the latter's attitude toward them. This confirms the authors' anecdotal experience: when formally presenting the findings to the police Chief and his staff, a couple of experienced officers acknowledged that when complaints about officers were made, they rarely related to the legitimacy of the citation rendered but instead focused on the manner in which it was delivered and/or explained.

The open-ended data were independently coded by two trained research assistants, achieving 99% inter-rater reliability on all questions. Interestingly relating to the above, the prime "concern or complaint" voiced was poor communication skills of officers ( $n = 73$ ) with the next concern interestingly being "none" ( $n = 57$ ). Following behind this were discrimination issues such as racial and youth profiling ( $n = 52$ ) and at a lower level of concern were slow response to calls ( $n = 29$ ), abuse of so-called "executive privilege" such as the parking of police mobile units in non-parking zones ( $n = 27$ ), and policing minor infractions like skateboarding and jaywalking ( $n = 27$ ). Of least concern for this particular agency was inappropriate use of force ( $n = 3$ ) and lawsuits ( $n = 3$ ).

Correspondingly, issues for improvement were first and foremost attitude and communication issues framed in terms of increased respect for and understanding of the public ( $n = 50$ ), followed by the need to employ more minority and female officers ( $n = 45$ ) as well as more officers in general ( $n = 43$ ). Besides explicitly stating nothing required improvement ( $n = 42$ ), attention was again focused on social discrimination (e.g., "more sensitive to the Hispanic community" and "Stop harassing kids just because they are young") and de-emphasizing petty

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offenses ( $n = 12$ ). Maybe one lesson arising from these data are that police agencies could do more in terms of media and public relations if they explained reasons for: executive privilege, the seemingly differential attention to petty offences at varying events, and an apparently bias towards detaining people from certain social and minority groups more than others.

Regarding matters currently approved of, again by far the greatest sentiment was accorded a good attitude and communication ( $n = 137$ ), with timely response to calls for service mentioned positively ( $n = 44$ ) as was a “good presence” ( $n = 36$ ) and maintaining safety through stopping drunk drivers ( $n = 24$ ). Interestingly, only four people mentioned the need for community programs. When asked explicitly about whether respondents had heard of the term “community-oriented policing,” only 25% of the sample claimed they had. When these were invited to explain what this meant, only half were anywhere near accurate. For instance, this was variously attributed to “spy on your neighbor” and to “it sounds like a horrible idea to give anyone in the community police authority...” In other words, only 13% of the entire sample understood the term identifying a police-community partnership at all. Hence, having an array of community-oriented programs in place is one action but communicating about it effectively may require more attention, particularly in light of the fact that issues of abuse of police force in other agencies figure prominently in the media when they are “caught on video” (see Giles & Anderson, 2003; Giles & Dailey, 2003).

## Study 2

Study 1 was conducted in the English language with only a small number of Latino informants involved. The percentage of Latinos in this same city is over 30%, many of whose first language is Spanish. Hence, the study was re-run in the latter language (back-translated) through the auspices and support of community-respected priests at the end of Mass in two

socioeconomically-distinct areas of the same city (west- and east-side).<sup>5</sup> This study was conducted, in the main, to determine if the above findings regarding the role of perceived accommodation were robust enough to be evident under very different ethnolinguistic and judgment conditions. After extensive piloting with members of the local Latino community, some key questions remained the same and others were adjusted to the new context. The anonymous questionnaire had to be necessarily shorter given the literacy level of the sample and time pressures on its administration. Questions (using 7-point rating scales and besides the socio-demographic) that were constant across studies were: amount of contact with local officers; willingness to call for service if there were a crime in progress; and perceived accommodativeness of officers. New questions related to feelings of anxiety in interacting with officers and feelings of safety in general, given the local agency. Finally, respondents were asked about the perceived corruption in and accommodativeness of officers in their country of origin.

720 respondents completed the questionnaire, 55.7% being female, and 90% being of Mexican origin (the remainder variously from Central and South America); the age range and spread across decades was the same as Study 1. Looking at the data from the two sites, multivariate statistics showed that males, especially those young adults from the (less economically-privileged) west-side had more contact with the police, lived in the community for less time, and had had poorer views of officers' accommodativeness in their country of origin ( $p_s < .01$ ).

Multivariate statistics conducted on the same items in both studies showed very few meaningful differences, apart from the fact that there were no gender effects in Study 2. Put another way, respondents in both studies 1 and 2 had just as much prior contact with officers,

were just as willing to call for service, saw them as just as accommodating, and rated their performance the same. Importantly, while ethnic differences emerged in Study 1 in the English language (see above), those administered the questionnaire in Spanish evinced no differences from the entire sample questioned in English. When examining the items new to Study 2, however, the Spanish-speaking sample felt a little anxious with officers ( $M = 4.40$ ) but felt rather safe in general ( $M = 4.86$ ). They did view police in their country of origin as quite corrupt ( $M = 4.64$ ) and much less accommodating ( $M = 2.94$ ) than in their current California home ( $M = 4.84$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Interestingly, and allied to data which show across contexts that people feel they perceive less problematic behavior than do others (e.g., Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990; Reid, Giles, & Harwood, 2005), respondents felt that others in the community had more negative attitudes of the local police department than they did themselves ( $p < .01$ ).

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Insert Figure 2 here  
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Again, our main interest was to determine what factors predicted attitudes toward the police, in particular, performance ratings. Figure 2 displays the structural equation model which showed a very good overall fit to these data ( $\chi^2(12) = 15.27, p = .23, \chi^2/df = 1.27, TLI = .99, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .02$ ). As in Study 1, perceptions of officers' accommodativeness were strongly predictive of performance ratings of the local police department, with willingness to call and east- versus west-side residency also having small direct effects. That is, the less one construed police as accommodating in one's country of origin and the more years one had lived in the local Californian community studied herein, in particular, the (less advantaged) west-side of it, the less accommodating police were perceived to be. And least importantly, speaking Spanish-only was associated more with the west-siders which, in turn, was associated with lesser

years spent living in the local community. In sum, how accommodating officers are seen to be strongly predicts images of law enforcement within both of these English- and Spanish-speaking communities.

### Study 3

In order to assess even more rigorously the impact of officers' perceived communicative effectiveness in shaping people's images of them, this last study was conducted with another sample and with yet another judging mechanism (an online survey). The informants for Study 3 were students at a university adjacent to the city involved in the previous two studies; this time the police department was the students' own university law enforcement agency (see Grant, 1993). Students at this campus numbered approximately 22,000, with a university police of 30 sworn officers. On this occasion, the breadth and depth of items was very much increased. For instance, in the previous two studies, officers' perceived accommodativeness was assessed by a single (albeit multiply-illustrated) item, as was amount of contact with officers. In order to better assess the potency of the role of accommodation in ATP, and using Study 1's questionnaire as the foundation, the number of items tapping accommodation was increased to four. Not only were the number of items measuring contact with police increased (cf. Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003) and items concerning intergroup anxiety added (see Blair, Park, & Bachelor, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 1985), but questions derived from research and theory in legitimacy of authority (e.g., Sunshine & Tyler, 2003a; Huo & Tyler, 2000), trust (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003a; Walklate, 2002; Stoutland, 2001), and other issues (together with perceptions of safety) found to be implicated in ATP were inserted. Gratifyingly, accommodation, trust, contact, safety, legitimacy of authority, and anxiety emerged as separate dimensions (see items in the Appendix) in an exploratory factor analysis of these data.



A sample of 4000 students from the registration records were contacted and invited to answer a rather extensive questionnaire on-line concerning their views of the university police<sup>6</sup>. In addition to socio-demographic items and dimensions outlined above, students were asked the same open-ended items used in Study 1. The response rate was 12%, and after eliminating 11% of this group from the original 12%, given their close relationships with officers, there was a sample of 448 who were representative of the student population as a whole. 84% were undergraduates and 16% graduate students (mean ages = 21 and 29 years, respectively) and had spent on average 2.6 years at the university. 51% were female and 66% Caucasian, the racial and ethnic composition of the remaining 34% being quite diverse.

In general, the students reported little contact with the campus police. The means (on seven-point scales where 7 = very high) were as follows: general contact ( $M = 1.9$ ), contact initiated by students themselves ( $M = 1.5$ ), police initiated contact ( $M = 1.6$ ), and observed police contact with other students ( $M = 2.7$ ). Students felt safe in the classroom ( $M = 6.47$ ) and during the daytime ( $M = 6.55$ ), albeit less so at night ( $M = 4.74$ ); white males felt the safest and non-white females the least. Ratings across other dimensions common to the prior studies indicated considerable similarity. Albeit somewhat lower, the means were significantly above the neutral mid-point on 7-point scales. In general, ratings of the campus police and satisfaction with them were moderately good ( $M = 4.53$  and  $M = 4.31$ , respectively) and students felt comparable levels of trust in ( $M = 4.58$ ) and accommodation from ( $M = 4.21$ ) officers. The respondents showed some level of anxiety ( $M = 4.11$ ) and lower than midpoint reports of feeling an obligation to obey the police ( $M = 3.84$ ; see relevant items in the appendix). As in Study 1, females reported higher ratings of satisfaction with the police and felt more trust in and accommodation from

officers. Similarly, Caucasians reported more satisfaction with and accommodation from officers than their non-Caucasian counterparts ( $p_s < .05-.01$ ).

Of course, the purpose of the study was understanding the factors predicting ATP. Structural equation modeling ( $\chi^2(61) = 197.86, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 3.2, TLI = .99, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .07$ ) showed that both trust in and perceived accommodation from campus officers predicted performance ratings (albeit not satisfaction ratings). Again, accommodation was the

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much larger predictor although trust and accommodation are mutually influenced by each and themselves predict, and are predicted by, the likelihood that students will obey the police.

Interestingly, and largely in line with previous patterns, socio-demographic factors were not at all predictive of outcomes, nor were amounts of contact with the police, felt safety, or anxiety.

When examining the open-ended answers, by far the most concern was expressed about officers' communication style ( $n = 36$ ) as in "unnecessarily bossy," "treating us like kids." With regard to recommended changes ( $n = 48$ ), the same issue arose (e.g., "more politeness—it's a university campus, not a prison"; "be more respectful and ethnic-oriented to the diversity on campus." Correspondingly, the most praise ( $n = 32$ ) was conveyed about respectful communications when it occurred, as in "the officers I have encountered have been very polite and professional" and "an officer smiled at me and said 'hello' to me when I said 'good morning'."

### Applied and Theoretical Implications

Using three very different (and also fairly large) respondent populations as well as quite different data elicitation procedures, perceptions of officer accommodation were consistently a

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major predictor of rating of police. Not only did this emerge as a larger predictor than trust, but also socio-demographic variables, which were such a feature of prior studies introduced at the outset, paled in comparison to perceptions of officers' communication skills. Even amount of contact with officers and how safe respondents felt had little bearing on ATP. Moreover, communication issues were construed as paramount when generated spontaneously by respondents in their open-ended responses. Relatedly, we have been collecting survey data across the USA and around the world where – as with many of the Study 2 respondents – policing connotes varying meanings in terms of police abuse of power and corruption as in the People's Republic of China and Russia (Giles et al., in press). Here where accommodation does not directly predict ATP and trust does (i.e. when they both are in the evaluative frame together), perceived accommodation from officers is the major predictor of trust.

Given that it is commonly estimated that 97% of police work is related to or communicating with the public and their issues (Thompson, 1983) and the remainder managing physical confrontations, accommodative practices can be enormously important in this regard. Paradoxically, 98% of police training is devoted to officer safety in terms of learning arrest, control, defensive, and weapon techniques. It is an empirical question as to what extent invoking the latter techniques could be avoided, or at least attenuated in terms of level of force involved, if appropriate accommodative skills were engaged (cf. Thompson, 1983). While the importance of officer safety through perishable physical skills and muscle memory cannot be diminished, these findings of the overwhelming importance of officers' accommodative practices in determining ATP, suggest that far more attention should be directed at developing communication skills in general and accommodative ones in particular. Put another way, if community-oriented policing is going to take off in any meaningful way, then the intergroup boundaries between law

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enforcement and the public must be dissolved. That said, obviously accommodative behavior in some situations might be construed as over-accommodating and, indeed not conducive to effective outcomes, breeding perhaps complacency and perceived vulnerability (Springer, 1994). The fine line of detecting cues to know when to accommodate and “code-switch” to another more controlling and assertive response is an important communicative ability. Indeed, future research could determine individual differences among officers’ adoption of accommodation in different contexts. Mastrofski et al. (2002) has provided a typology of police officers and one might predict that their “professional” type might be more inherently accommodative than their “reactive” or “avoidant” let alone “tough cop” counterparts.

One way of approaching this is to insure that officers act (and hence, one hopes, are perceived as acting) more accommodatively to a wide variety of civilians (foreign, mentally disturbed, elderly, and so forth). In due course, we shall be starting programmatic research to determine in actual police-civilian encounters what can be coded (verbally and nonverbally) as accommodative and confirming actions on the one hand and nonaccommodating and disconfirming actions on the other (e.g., Sieburg, 1976). Moreover, with a better handle on the accommodative ingredients (which will likely be manifest in address forms, listening, explanations, smiling and so forth), their effects on other outcomes can be determined (e.g., citation versus warning and escalations of aggression or violence). Indeed, while statistics in many agencies are gathered regarding officers’ number of arrests and citations, little formal credit is afforded warnings or appropriate accommodative behavior. Although we do not wish to add to the already heavy burdens of paperwork involved in policing, maybe appropriate noting of such accommodations-nonaccommodations could be sensitively introduced and rewarded in officer evaluations and promotional considerations.

We do not, however, see this as a one-way street and the public needs to be educated towards understanding the sometimes necessary but perceptually *nonaccommodating* stances that officers need to take for their own (as well as others') safety. For instance, the anxious and uncertain states (Gudykunst, 1995) of the public in a traffic stop – and one where police officers are, arguably, interpersonally engaged with civilians the most (Cox & White, 1988) – can for officers be the most risky and dangerous, even in an apparently routine case; the latter have no idea at the time whether those stopped have just committed criminal activity and/or possess weapons. Hence, uncooperative or even belligerent civilians who do not, or cannot, accommodate the difficulty the officer could be placed in (irrespective of the civilian's *actual* harmlessness) can begin to create the very communicative climate that does not facilitate accommodation in officers in the first place. Anecdotally speaking, one of the authors has instructed many hundreds of students on such encounters. It is axiomatic that students readily acknowledge retrospective anger and frustration at the time of a “pull-over” and it is rare to hear any hint of an acknowledgement of wrong-doing (e.g., an apology); although admittedly a few have strategically wept to garner sympathy!

All in all, there is much that needs to be done. Police agencies might do better by communicating why and when they operate zero-tolerance policies and engage in what to the public appears to be punishing of petty offences, although they are documented as dangerous (e.g., jay-walking, and riding bikes off designated paths). Agencies could better communicate why executive privilege of parking units (i.e., where police officers park in no-parking zones) is necessary and why many officers are needed to quell an unruly incident or one that has the potential to break out into one. Finally, many observers of police arrests or warnings need to be cognizant of the fact that if they themselves were anywhere as inebriated as were suspects being

engaged late at night, neither of these parties is likely to have been processing information about the incident in an unbiased manner (see Giles, Coupland, & Wu, 1992).

Our studies extend communication accommodation theory into an exciting new social arena. Prior and developing iterations of CAT (e.g., Street & Giles, 1982; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987; Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995) have featured formal propositions where being the recipient of accommodation (notwithstanding certain contextual caveats) triggers perceived similarity and liking. Our data here show that vicariously observing and/or directly receiving accommodation from officers – presumably consistently from very different officers and over a reasonable period of time – will engender not only positive attitudes toward individual officers (and likely relieve stress, anxiety, and frustration), but also promote trust of and satisfaction with one’s local agency. The dynamics of what kinds, how much, and how many officers need to accommodate in direct and indirect contact programs (see Hopkins et al., 1992) – such as where officers are resources in local high schools or portrayed as such in the media – for this to generalize to the group as a whole are fascinating empirical questions. Clearly, there is the potential for discounting individual officers as exceptions or the individuals as a unique and uncharacteristic subgroup divorced from the main body of police (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; see also, Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000; Wright, Brody, & Aron, 2005). Somehow, such programs would need to be devised where such accommodations are believed to be prototypical of officers *in general*.

Finally, we hope that future studies of communication in organizations where power structures are inherent (Boggs & Giles, 1999; Gardner, Paulsen, Gallois, Callan, & Monaghan 2001; Paulsen, Graham, Jones, Callan, & Gallois, 2005), the police (Toch, 2003) as well as other

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branches of the criminal justice system, social welfare agencies and more, might afford close attention to accommodative processes as they influence relevant organizational outcomes.

Notes

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<sup>3</sup>The actual wording of the perceived accommodation question was: “In general, how accommodating are police officers? (i.e., how well do you think they listen to people, take their views into account, and want to understand their needs and unique situations?)”.

<sup>4</sup>For further details, contact the authors.

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<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire covered a number of domains not pertinent to the issues under consideration here (yet relevant as feedback for the university police), such as comparisons with other local agencies, equality of treatment of different groups, jurisdiction, alcohol use, and sources of information about the university police.



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### **Appendix: Study 3 Factors and attending items**

**QUANTITY OF CONTACT:** How much contact/interaction have you had with the police? By interaction/contact we mean that you and police personnel either communicated or had physical contact – in person, by phone, or by mail. (This includes calls to the police department, complaints, reports, arrests, questioning, chatting, etc.); Indicate the amount of contact/interaction you have had with police that **you** initiated (e.g., you asked for assistance, etc.); Indicate the amount of contact/interaction you have had with police that **the police** initiated (e.g. questioning, citation, arrest); and Indicate the amount of contact/interaction **you have seen others have** with police (e.g., you were with a friend who was pulled over for speeding, you were at a community event where you saw the police break up a fight).

**ACCOMMODATION:** How **pleasant** overall are the police?; In general, how **accommodating** are police officers? (i.e., how well do you think they listen to people, take their views into account, and want to understand their needs and unique situations?); In general, how **respectful** of students are police officers?; How **polite** are police officers?; and How well do police officers **explain things to people** (i.e., talk to people in ways that “sit right” with them, and that they understand)?

**TRUST:** How much **respect** do you have for the police?; To what degree do you think police officers are **honest**?; To what degree do you feel **proud** of the police? To what degree do you feel you should **support** the police?; To what degree do you feel that police decisions are **fair**?; To what degree do you feel the police **protect citizen rights**?; I have confidence that the police department can do its job well; I trust the police to make decisions that are good for everyone in the community; and In general, how respectful of citizens are the police?

**LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY:** People **should obey** the police even if what the police officers say or do goes against what they think is right; I would **always try to follow** what a police officer says I should do, even if I thought it was wrong; **Disobeying** a police officer is seldom justified; It is **difficult to disobey** a police officer and keep one's self-respect; and Overall, the police are a **legitimate legal authority**, and **people should obey** the decisions that police officers make.

**SAFETY:** I feel safe at home; I feel safe walking alone in the daytime; and I feel safe walking alone at night when it is dark.

**ANXIETY:** I feel **confident** with the police; I feel **anxious** with the police; I feel **relaxed** with the police; I feel **awkward** when interacting with the police; and I feel **self-conscious** when talking to the police.

Figure 1: Structural Equation Model of City-Wide Responses to Local Police: English

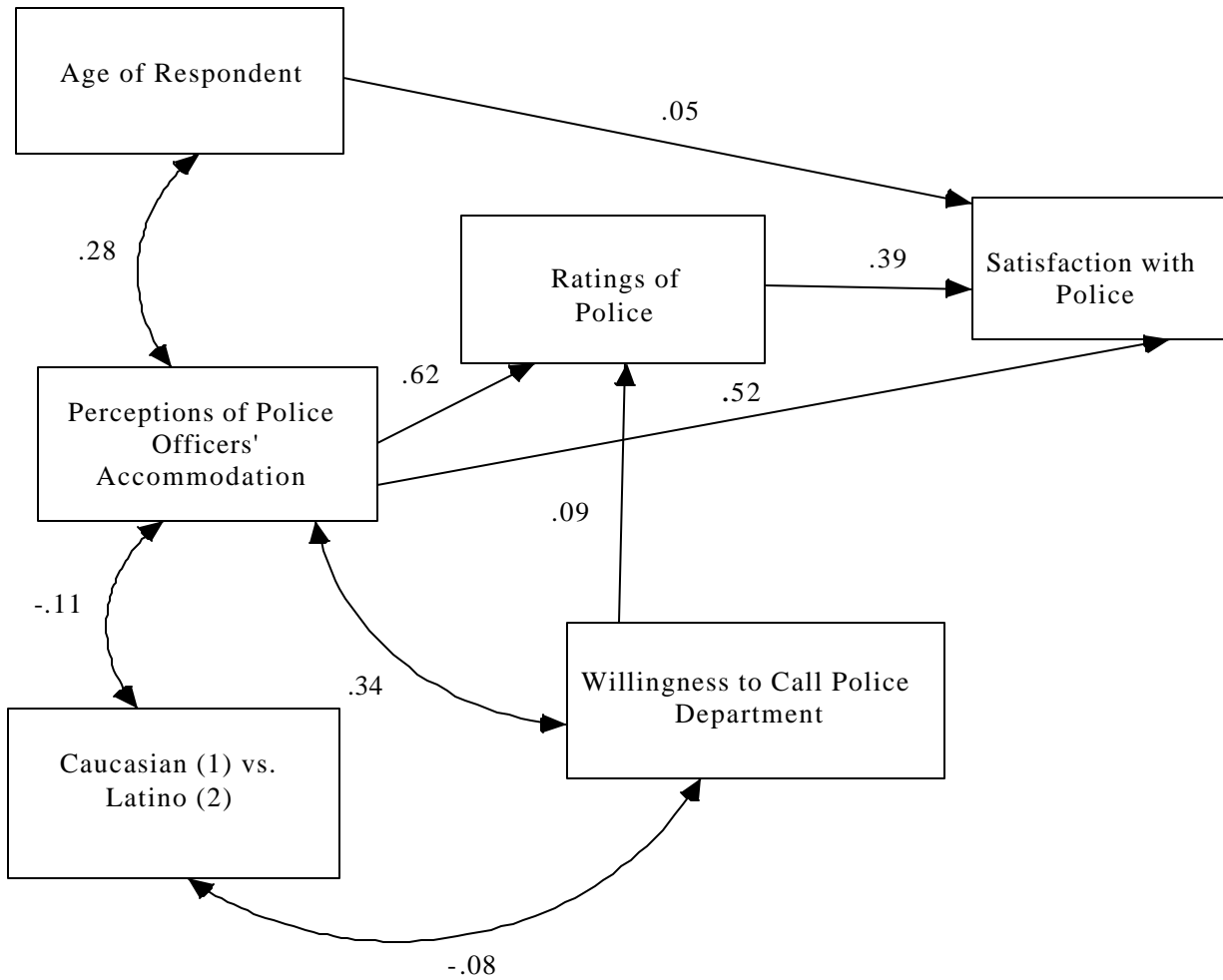


Figure 2: Structural Equation Model of City-Wide Responses to Local Police: Spanish

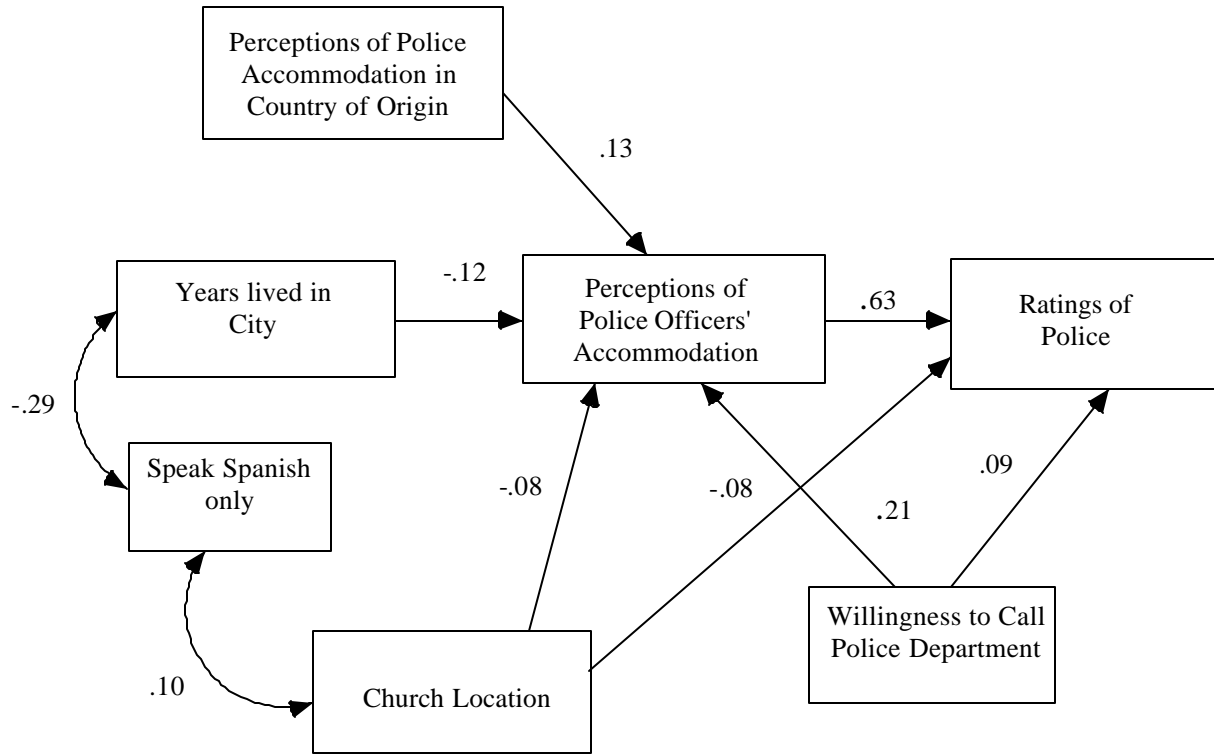


Figure 3: Study 3 - Structural Equation Model of Student Responses to Campus Police

