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# Attitudes and Perceived Legitimacy of Police: Crises, Responses, and How Race Influences Perceptions

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Crises, Responses, and How Race Influences Perceptions


by


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"Attitudes and Perceived Legitimacy of Police:
Crises, Responses, and How Race Influences Perceptions"
A graduate thesis by Brigitte Bonaci

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# Abstract

Attitudes and Perceived Legitimacy of Police: Crises, Responses, and
How Race Influences Perceptions

by

Brigitte Bonaci

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Public relations is a strategic field because an organization
may need to structure a message with the intent of persuading the
public and making it respond to a crisis and a message in a certain
way. This study will help introduce the concept of a lingering crisis
that is hardly present in research and could be put under the public
relations umbrella. Using a survey of communications students, this
study will compare the public attitudes and perceptions of perceived
legitimacy of a police department after it experiences one of three
crisis types, one of which being a lingering crisis. Attitudes and
legitimacy will again be compared after the department releases an
apology or denial in response to the crisis. The final component that
this study will measure is how the race of the participants influences
the outcome variables. The results of this study may have important
implications because the crises that are used reflect current events and
could impact how organizations, specifically police departments,
communicate after a crisis.

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# List of Keywords

public affairs

police

officer-involved shootings

apology

denial

crisis

perceptions

legitimacy

attitudes

communication

# List of Exhibits

# Chapter 1:
# Introduction

The Public Relations Society of America currently defines public relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually exclusive beneficial relationships between organization and their publics" (About Public Relations). This seems to be a rather simple definition of public relations. Russel and Lamme (2016) explain that definitions of public relations tend to focus on the functions performed in this field or on public relations as a function of an organization. Instead, the authors use strategic intent and human agency to describe public relations. First, strategic intent involves the strategies used to reach a specific outcome or goal. Secondly, human agency refers to the choice that members of the public have to respond to an organization. So, to qualify as public relations, an organization sends a message structured to achieve a specific goal to a target audience, and the audience has the ability to respond to that message. Public relations is most certainly strategic, which is seen in both definitions, and involves communicating with the public.

A situation in which an organization may need to employ public relations strategies is when a crisis occurs. The strategic

component comes into play because the organization may have to decide what to do about the crisis. Additionally, the crisis could impact a second party outside of the organization, like the general public. In this situation, the organization could initiate communication with public, which would trigger the public's human agency. Further strategy might need to be employed if an organization intends for the public to respond in a certain way.

This study will help introduce a concept that is hardly present in research and could be put under the public relations umbrella. The lingering crisis could be considered a public relations crisis because, when an organization experiences the same crisis repeatedly over a period of time, the organization would have to strategically construct messages intended to make the public respond in a certain way, while at the same time the public has human agency to accept or reject the organization's message.

Another important component of this study with important implications for organizations is having to deal with conflicts that possibly involve race. More specifically, when an organization experiences a crisis, the ethnicities of the individual members of the public could influence perceptions about the organization. This creates a situation in which an organization would have to communicate with the public and control the threat as well as controlling the development of negative perceptions.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to research that explores the best ways for organizations, like police departments, to attempt to restore legitimacy and their relationships with the public through communication.

# Background

The year 2014 might serve as the beginning of a major crisis in police departments. In the past few years, there has been a string of officer-involved shootings of civilians that have been highly exposed in the media. Although it is safe to assume that officer-involved shootings have occurred in the past, it is possible that shootings of civilians have become over-represented and high-profile due to an advanced and evolving era of media, including the increasing use of video technology by members of the public (Miller, 2016). There is now a new level of visibility that allows the public to become a watchdog of police departments. The visibility and exposure has uncovered a crisis in police departments that does not appear to be coming to an end. The legitimacy of police departments has been shattered and needs to be mended. Miller (2016) notes that, when concerning police legitimacy, this new visibility is the primary avenue for exposing transgressions among officers. Visibility, along with technology, will not go away and may only continue to evolve, so the mending must begin with the police departments and their communication with the public when facing a crisis.

When examining a series of crises, it seems suitable to explore the catalyst that caused the explosion of media attention and public protest. In August of 2014, Michael Brown, a young African-American adult was fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (McLaughlin, 2014). According to Miller (2016), the shooting of this young man was the catalyst that placed police misconduct on the national stage. Soon after the shooting, St. Louis

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County Police Chief Jon Belmar denied any wrongdoing and stated that the officer was acting in self-defense, however, his statements completely contradicted witness reports that an innocent Brown was shot with his hands in the air (McLaughlin, 2014). When the court ruled against charging the officer who shot Brown, massive protests ensued, pursuing justice over police violence.

Soon after, in October and November of 2014, two more young African-Americans, Laquan McDonald and Tamir Rice were also shot and killed by White police officers (Shoichet, 2015; Williams & Smith, 2015). Similar high-profile shootings continued to occur over the years in different states, and, in most cases, witnesses and video evidence revealed that these civilians were victims of excessive force by the officers (Miller, 2016). When McDonald was shot 16 times by officer Van Dyke, the officer had claimed that the teenager had lunged at him with a knife, but the dashcam video released one year later showed McDonald walking away when the shots began (Shoichet, 2015). In November 2014, Officers Loehmann and Garmback were informed of suspicious activity but were not relayed the information that he was likely a youth with a gun that was also likely fake (Williams & Smith, 2015). Officer Loehmann did not hesitate to shoot at the 12-year-old with video evidence showing the shots were taken in less than a second. Despite this, department spokespeople and prosecutors claimed that the officer abided by the law because it was difficult to discern whether the gun was fake and whether Rice was surrendering what was actually a pellet gun or drawing it to shoot.

The Rice and McDonald cases serve as yet two more examples of high-profile crises that threaten the legitimacy of police and the relationship between departments and the public. The type of

crisis presented here is no ordinary crisis. Officer-involved shootings have transformed into a crisis that is lingering and departments' legitimacy continues to be threatened. It is essential for departments to find and utilize the most effective communication to restore their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. If this does not happen, police departments will not be able to effectively keep communities safe. The National Research Council predicted that, in facing the decreasing public trust in police, communities will encounter higher crime rates as a direct outcome of the disintegrating perceived legitimacy, less cooperation with officers, and reduced budgets for law enforcement (Cook, 2015). Effective communication and change must begin as soon as possible if these things are to be avoided.

# Review of Literature

Generally, a crisis can be defined as any internal or external threat that can cause damage to an organization's reputation (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). According to Hearit (1995), a gap between the expectations that the public has of an organization and the actions taken by the organization results in a crisis. The bigger the difference between expectations and the actual behavior, the larger the crisis that the organization experiences. When considering the officer-involved shootings of civilians, police departments may be experiencing a crisis of legitimacy (Chikudate, 2010; Tyler, 2004). Legitimacy is composed of the perceptions and expectations that the public has about the procedural fairness and lawfulness of an officer's conduct, especially when interacting with civilians (Cook, 2015; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Thus, legitimacy

is essential for officers to effectively maintain order and keep communities safe because it reinforces public cooperation, trust, and obedience to an organization that is entitled to those elements of legitimacy (Mazerolle, Antrobus, & Bennett, 2013; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Ultimately, legitimacy, and the perceptions that the public has about a department's legitimacy, are key to its success (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

With police departments struggling to maintain legitimacy, effective communication with the public may be the answer to restoring this crucial relationship. But before attempting to find the best type of response to a crisis of this kind, one must understand how the public perceives an organization that depends on the cooperation and compliance of the people in order to be effective.

## Perceptions of Police

Understanding public perceptions may be the first, and most important, step in developing communication that is geared toward restoring a positive image. One study by Tuch and Weitzer (1997), centered on the perceptions of three high-profile incidences of officer misconduct in Los Angeles. These included two beatings; one from 1979 and the other from 1991, and a killing from 1996. Uniquely, the authors used trending data to cover a long period of time from the National Opinion Research Center and the Gallup Poll in addition to a national survey and other polls conducted in Los Angeles. They found that, after each occurrence of officer misconduct, positive perceptions of the police severely declined.

The National Institute of Justice conducted a survey to examine factors that impact perceptions of police (Ashcroft, Daniels,

& Hart, 2003). Most notably, the researchers measured perceptions of how well officers do their job (job approval), perceptions of officer demeanor, perceptions of disorder and crime, type of contact with police, and demographics of the participants. They concluded that the most positive perceptions occurred in the presence of informal contact with the police. In these instances, civilians had fewer feelings of victimization, a decreased fear of crime, a perceived absence of violent crime, perceived absence of disorder, and increased perceptions of cohesion and control in the community. These types of results are important to consider because every community is different, and understanding the context and situation of a community might be helpful in understanding perceptions. As previously mentioned, police departments are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy and measuring the public perceptions of police legitimacy could offer insight into a solution.

In 2003, Sunshine and Tyler published a two-part study, pre-9/11 and post-9/11, to examine perceptions of police legitimacy. The pre-9/11 part of the study used a sample of 483 participants from New York City who returned questionnaires, while the post-9/11 part of the survey consisted of 1653 telephone interviews with people living in New York City. Both parts found that legitimacy significantly influenced compliance and cooperation from civilians. Similar results were found in a large-scale face-to-face survey of over 5,000 Londoners measuring legitimacy and the outcomes of obedience and cooperation (Tankebe, 2013). Again, legitimacy had a significant positive relationship with cooperation. These results are important to consider because they support the idea that legitimacy is linked to how effectively police departments can perform.

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Tyler (2004) further supports the importance of the public perceptions of police legitimacy. First, the author emphasizes that legitimacy has much to do with the extent to which individuals trust officers and view departments as honest organizations. Secondly, Tyler (2004) associates civilian compliance to officers with perceptions of legitimacy. A central component to this is that perception of legitimacy is the main driver for why people comply with the police. Lastly, the author suggests that a major predictor of perceptions of legitimacy lies in the perceptions that civilians hold about how officers use their power and authority when interacting with the public.

A 2016 Gallup poll regarding respect for the police showed an increase from 2015, and this increase was seen in both Whites and Non-whites (McCarthy, 2016). Previously, in 2015, nearly one-fifth of the Americans surveyed expressing little to no confidence in the police, which is the highest level of mistrust for the police the poll has ever measured (Jones, 2015). In this latest poll, about three-fourths of Americans had a great deal of respect for the police, while the rest indicated they had some respect or hardly any respect for the police (McCarthy, 2016). These results seem optimistic among the results from previous literature.

Studies published in academic articles provide valuable information that can be used for organizational decisions in communication, but one cannot disregard the reactions of real people as they rioted in response to these types of incidents. In the shootings of Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, and Tamir Rice, protests or riots swiftly followed (McLaughlin, 2014; Shoichet, 2015; Williams & Smith, 2015). Peaceful or not, citizens took matters into their own hands to express their opinions and to fight for justice. Riots and

protests are not limited to these three high-profile events and the right communication may have the power to put riots against the police to a rest.

In an analysis of more than 100 journal articles on public perceptions of police, Brown and Benedict (2002) concluded that citizen age, type of contact with the police, the type of neighborhood or community, and race were the four main variables that consistently had an impact on public perceptions across the sample of studies.

## Considering Race of Participants in Forming Perceptions

As seen in the Tuch and Weitzer (1997) study, race is one factor that influences perceptions of police, and it is difficult to ignore race when shooting after shooting involves a white officer and an African-American civilian. Although the results from the 2016 Gallup poll seemed optimistic showing the increase in respect for the police, a report that combined Gallup polls from 2014 to 2016 breaks down respect for the police among White and Non-White Americans (Newport, 2016). This report found that about six out of ten Whites had a great deal of respect for the police while only half as many Blacks indicated the same.

Additional results from Brown and Benedict's (2002) analysis of over 100 articles from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s showed that, overall, African-American participants were more likely to view police officers less positively than White participants. Most studies in the analysis agreed that this perception may be due to African-American citizens receiving more negative contact and experiences with officers. The conduct of officers appears to be difficult to fix and is taking longer that it should, thus, the communication from the

department to the public can more easily be manipulated to create favorable opinions.

Weitzer and Tuch (2004) used a survey to measure perceptions of officer misconduct and asked about the frequency of unfair traffic stops, excessive verbal and physical abuse, and officer corruption. Participants were separated by race and the findings revealed that for each type of officer behavior that was asked about in the questionnaire, African-American participants were more likely to hold negative perceptions of the police compared to all other groups and Caucasian participants were the least likely to have to negative views. From these findings the authors concluded that race plays a role in shaping perceptions of the police.

In another analysis, Ross (2015) used data from the U.S. Police-Shooting Database which was initiated in 2014 and contains data from 2011 to 2014. This data is unique because it was not developed or published by the government and attempts to reduce officer bias by taking into account the under-reporting of officer-involved shootings and selective reporting by officers. Ross (2015) uncovered a significant bias in killing an unarmed African-American citizen compared to a Caucasian citizen where the unarmed African-American was about three and half times more likely to be shot by an officer. Additionally, an unarmed African-American citizen was equally as likely to be shot as an armed Caucasian citizen. This means that, on average, officers perceived and unarmed African American citizen as dangerous as an armed Caucasian. A third important finding from this analysis was that an armed African American was almost three times as likely to be shot compared to an armed Caucasian citizen (Ross, 2015).

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All of these findings are excellent examples of the very real possibility of the presence of actual racial bias in police departments, not just perceptions of bias. Similar to the findings by Ashcroft and colleagues (2003) that looked into the context of communities surrounding public perceptions of police, Ross (2015) found a pattern indicating that the rate of police shootings increased as population, proportion of African-American residents, and inequality of income increased and as median income decreased. Again, knowing the context of the community, especially if race appears to be so substantial, it may be important to take into account when developing communication.

However, some studies suggest that race is not as significant of a factor in perceptions of the police. In the analysis of the Ashcroft et al. (2003) study, the differences in perceptions in terms of race of civilians disappeared. A more recent study from 2013, found that, among samples of police officers, military officers, and civilians who were presented with videos of scenarios, participants took longer to shoot an African-American and were actually less likely to shoot an unarmed African-American (James, Vila & Daratha, 2013).

## Types of Crises

Recall that a crisis can be defined as an internal or external threat that can cause damage to an organization's reputation (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Furthermore, a crisis is also when a discrepancy exists between the expectations the public has of an organization and the actions the organization takes (Hearit, 1995).

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According to Coombs and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the first step in the process of restoring a reputation during a crisis is to recognize the type of crisis that is at hand (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The study presented in this paper focused in three different types of crises: a one-time crisis, a differing crisis, and a lingering crisis. A one-time crisis reflects a positive organizational history and perceptions of an organization tend to be more positive for an organization with a positive history compared to a negative history of crises (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Additionally, a single crisis amidst a positive history also tends to be viewed as a temporary instability in the performance of the organization and is less intentional on the part of the organization. In other words, the organization is perceived as being less responsible for a single event because it is out of the organization's control due to external causes.

On the other hand, when crises (not necessarily the same crisis) continue to occur within the same organization, it is perceived as a more stable crisis and the organization has more responsibility for it because it is perceived as something that can be avoided (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Griffin, 1994). This second type of crisis can be termed as a differing crisis. For this paper's study, this was defined as an organization involved in various crises over time and are different from the crisis that the department is experiencing most recently.

Thirdly, another crisis type examined in this study is a crisis that repeatedly occurs and will be labeled as a lingering crisis due to the frequency of occurrence and its stability in the organization. According to Griffin (1994), an increase in perceived stability or persistence of a crisis leads to increased perceptions of organizational responsibility. Additionally, as organizational responsibility increases,

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so do negative public perceptions. In support of this, Coombs and Holladay (2002) agree that as performance history gets worse, the more likely the public will place increased crisis responsibility on the organization. Given these assumptions, one might be able to conclude that a single-event would harbor the least amount of negative perceptions, followed by an event amidst a poor organizational history, while a lingering crisis would harbor the most negative public perceptions because it is the most constant and unvarying.

As previously mentioned, there is little research investigating the lingering crisis type. One study done by DeVries and Fitzpatrick (2005) define a lingering crisis as "multiple crisis events occurring over an extended time frame" as they investigated a series of animal deaths at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park (p. 165). The authors speculated that crises may linger if stakeholders reject the messages coming from the organization or if issues within the leadership of the organization are not tackled soon enough. This study was one of very few to use the term "lingering crisis" for the name of a crisis type.

Regardless of the type of crisis, Coombs and Holladay (2008) emphasize that a response must be made when a crisis occurs. There has to be some sort of message communicated to the public. It is up to the organization to make the right type response if the organization intends to create positive public perceptions.

## Making a Response

In the development of SCCT, Coombs (2007) created a typology of crisis response strategies to effectively combat different types of crises that an organization may encounter. The two major

types of responses most commonly used are apologies and denials. A full apology, according to Coombs and Holladay (2002) involves the organization publicly admitting responsibility for the crisis, while in a denial, the organization does not claim responsibility.

It is important to note that the response the organization chooses to make should be appropriate for the amount of reputational harm that needs to be restored, so the type of response should match the type of crisis that is being faced (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Communication during a crisis should be strategic because random communication may do more harm than good (Allen & Caillouet, 1994).

In a comparison of four different types of responses, participants received a news story in which the crisis stimulus was a chemical explosion (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Participants were then randomly assigned to be in the apology, compensation, sympathy, or information-only condition. Apology, compensation, and sympathy represented the accommodative strategies which were meant to help restore the organization's reputation, while the information-only condition served as a sort of control against the actual response types. The results from this study revealed that, overall, the perceptions produced by the sympathy, compensation, and apology responses were all very similar, so the authors were able to conclude that the sympathy and compensation responses can be just as effective in restoring a reputation as an apology. Other studies have found that releasing an apology is the best communication strategy available to organizations (Bradford & Garret; Dean, 2004). Bradford and Garret (1995) used a food safety crisis scenario and found that, generally across different situations, the apology produced the most positive public perceptions compared to denial, justification, or

excuse. In support of apologies, a study done by Dean (2004) found that when an organization used justice and sympathy, the organizations received the most positive perceptions from a publicly-made response.

On the other side of an apology, an organization can issue a denial in response to a crisis. As noted earlier, a denial is when an organization claims that they are not responsible for the crisis. (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Benoit (1995) adds to this definition in which an organization denies the disagreeable behavior and blame is placed on another party, whether that other party was responsible or not. However, this type of response should be used when there is only a small amount of responsibility that is expected to be taken or the crisis is not that significant or damaging. Even though issuing a denial is considered acceptable in some cases, like when an organization can provide evidence that it was not responsible for the crisis (Bradford and Garret, 1995), Dutta and Pullig (2011) advise that a denial is never an acceptable response, no matter what type of crisis. This conclusion was drawn after studying different types of responses across a performance-related crisis and a values-related crisis. In addition to a denial being the least effective strategy for both types of crises, an important conclusion that the authors made was that no one type of response strategy fits for all crises. In other words, the response must be tailored to the crisis. However, an interesting finding from a content analysis of 50 articles by Kim, Avery, & Lariscy (2009) revealed that organizations are actually more likely to issue a denial in response to a crisis. Hopefully, the research in this study will help organizations heed the advice found in academic research articles.

# The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to contribute to research that explores the best ways for organizations, like police departments, to attempt to restore legitimacy and their relationships with the public through communication. A specific focus was on the different types of crises that can be encountered, whether it is a one-time crisis, an organization experiencing various types of crises, or a lingering crisis. These ideas were studied in relation to a police department that had experienced a crisis involving an incident between a police officer and an African-American civilian which created a reputational threat for the police department. The department then had to make a response. A response was either an apology in which the department accepted responsibility for the crisis, or a denial in which the department did not take responsibility.

**Hypothesis 1a:** A one-time crisis would produce more positive attitudes towards the police department and higher perceived legitimacy compared to a lingering crisis and a differing crisis.

Recall that a one-time crisis after a positive history also tends to be viewed as a temporary instability in the performance of the organization and is less intentional on the part of the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Thus, the department will be perceived as being less responsible for a single event because it is out of the organization's control due to external causes.

**Hypothesis 1b:** A lingering crisis would produce less positive attitudes towards the police department and the lowest perceived legitimacy compared to a one-time crisis and a differing crisis.

Contrary to a one-time crisis, a lingering crisis – or the same crisis that repeatedly occurs – is perceived as a more stable crisis and the organization has more responsibility for it because it is perceived as something that can be avoided (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, Griffin, 1994). A lingering crisis is probably the most stable version of a crisis which could lead the highest perceptions of responsibility, the most negative public perceptions, and, thus, the least perceived legitimacy (Griffin, 1994).

**Hypothesis 2:** An apology would produce more positive attitudes after the response and higher perceived legitimacy compared to a denial in all crisis types.

Most research agrees that issuing an apology is an accommodative response used to restore reputations and positive public perceptions (Bradford & Garret, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Dean, 2004). On the other hand, Dutta and Pullig (2011) advise that a denial is never an acceptable response, no matter what type of crisis.

An additional component that was examined in this study was the role that race of the participant plays on the perceptions of the department.

**Hypothesis 3:** Non-white participants would have less positive attitudes and lower perceived legitimacy towards the police compared to White participants.

When forming perceptions, research points to a bias produced by race. A content analysis of more than 100 articles from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s showed that, overall, African-American participants were more likely to view police officers less positively than white participants (Brown & Benedict, 2002). This supports additional research, including Weitzer and Tuch's 1997 study which found race

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to be an influential factor in perceptions of police, and their 2004
study which found that African-American participants held the most
negative views of the police while Caucasian participants held the
most positive views.

# Chapter 2:
# Method

## Study Overview

This study was a 3 (one-time crisis vs. differing crisis vs. lingering crisis) x 2 (apology vs. denial) between-subjects experimental design. This study was a cross-sectional experiment where two major variables were manipulated: crisis type and crisis response. Participants were first exposed to a manipulated crisis scenario which was the between-subjects part of the design. Afterward, participants were then exposed to a manipulated crisis response from the involved organization. Participants answered a questionnaire after the scenario and after the response. Measurements of perceptions before and after the response were compared to each other as the within-subjects part of the design. All participants were randomly assigned to each condition.

# Participants

The sample was first recruited using the snowball method. By following the instructions at the end of the survey, participants were instructed to send the survey link to two Caucasian adults and two African American adults. The survey link was also posted to social media through Facebook and Twitter and to a private southeastern university's online message board. A gift card of $10 was used briefly as an incentive for a last attempt to gather participants.

# Manipulations

Three different crisis scenarios were developed to manipulate the crisis type. The first scenario was a *one-time crisis* in which a police officer is involved in an incident of excessive force (beating) against a civilian. A beating was chosen for this scenario because a one-time shooting might be associated too much with current events, while participants might be able to better isolate a beating from recent shootings. The civilian is hospitalized and later passes away in the hospital. The second scenario was a differing crisis in which an officer-involved shooting has just occurred. This is termed as a *differing crisis* because the shooting differs from previous crises that the department has experienced, which in this scenario are biased traffic stops. The third crisis scenario is a *lingering crisis* and involved a series of successive officer-involved shootings.

Each crisis was controlled for having an internal locus of crisis responsibility. This meant that each crisis represented an internal problem in the department and each was a situation in which the

department *should* accept responsibility. Another factor controlled in the scenarios was severity of the crisis. All scenarios resulted in the death of the civilian, presenting a high level of severity in which the department must make its response. Additionally, the civilian's race – African American – was mentioned once, while the race of the officer was not mentioned at all to explore participants' assumptions about this character.

The second manipulation was the response type. After exposure to a crisis scenario, participants received either an apology or a denial. The apology response involved a statement from the chief of police saying that the officer was responsible and apologizes to the victim. The other type of response was a denial and involved a different statement in which the chief says that the officer acted correctly and is not responsible.

# Materials

Each participant randomly received a scenario according to one of the three crisis types (See Appendix A). The scenarios were fictitious and constructed to be ambiguous to avoid skewing participants' perceptions in a negative or positive way. This was done by refraining from being obvious about the races of the civilian and the officer, and also by making statements that are *claims* or things *appear* to be certain way. For example, uncertainty is expressed about whether the civilian or the officer instigated the violence. The vignettes are in the form of news stories, and this form of news outlet was chosen because, according to Coombs (2007), most people learn about a crisis through news reports. The incident between a White

officer belonging to the fictitious Westwell Police Department and an African-American civilian remains the same across all scenarios, but details are changed to fit the crisis type. An apology and a denial were constructed as the messages that the department released after the given crisis. In the apology, the department's chief released a statement in which the department takes responsibility for the incident. By doing this, the blame is removed from the civilian, an apology is publicly provided, and the officer involved receives punishment. In the denial response, the department does not take responsibility for the incident, believes that the officer took appropriate actions, and places blame on the civilian.

A questionnaire was distributed to the participants (See Appendix B). The first part of the questionnaire was answered after the participants read the scenarios. This first part measured general attitudes toward the department before the response. The second part of the questionnaire was completed after exposure to the department's response to the crisis. This part of the questionnaire measured the general attitudes after the response and perceived legitimacy of the department.

# Measures

## General Attitude

First, participants were asked a series of questions about the perceived damage of the crisis and responsibility. These five items were a five-point Likert scale in which a score of one indicated the least amount of seriousness, responsibility, or damage, while a score of five

indicated the most. Questions included "How serious was the harm done to the civilian?" and "How responsible is the police department for this crisis?"

The following three items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale in which a score of one indicated that the participant strongly disagreed with the statement and a score of seven indicated that the participant strongly agreed. The statements included questions from Hon and Grunig's (1999) OPR measures from the Trust and Satisfactions scales that have been adapted for the specific scenarios in this study. These items included statements like "I have a good feeling about the Westwell Police Department" and "I admire and respect the WPD." The items from the Trust and Satisfaction scales were included in both measures before and after participants were exposed to the department's response. After the participants viewed the response, participants were presented with the same three statements along with a fourth statement the read as "The department is telling the truth in the Chief's response. The three items used to measure general attitude before the response obtained a Cronbach's *a* coefficient of .78, and four items were used to measure general attitude after the response, with an obtained Cronbach's *a* coefficient of .87.

## Perceived Legitimacy

Perceived legitimacy was measured using subscales of several dimensions of legitimacy and used only after the participants were exposed to the department's response. The three dimensions were procedural fairness, obligation to obey the police, and trust in the police. All items were on a seven-point Likert scale in which a score

of one indicated that the participant strongly disagreed with the statement and a score of seven indicated that the participant strongly agreed, and some items were changed to fit the fictitious scenario.

The first subscale of procedural fairness was derived from Tankebe (2013). This scale measured procedural fairness and included questions like "The police use rules and procedures that are fair to everyone" and "The police make decisions on facts, rather than their own personal opinions." The published Cronbach's $\alpha$ for the 5-item scale for procedural fairness is .81 (Tankebe, 2013). Three items from the procedural fairness subscale were used in this study.

The second subscale of obligation to obey the police was adapted from Sunshine and Tyler (2003) and consisted of nine items. This subscale included statements like "I should accept the decisions made by police, even if I think they are wrong" and "I should do what the police tell me to do even when I do not like the way they treat people like me." Six items from the obligation to obey subscale were used in this study.

Also derived from Sunshine and Tyler (2003), the ten-item subscale of trust in the police included statements like "Overall, the Westwell Police Department is a legitimate authority and people should obey the decisions that the WPD officers make" and "People's basic rights are protected by the police." The published Cronbach's $\alpha$ for the 19-item scale combining the obligation to obey and the trust dimensions is 0.84 (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Six items from the trust subscale were used. This study used a total of fifteen items to create the perceived legitimacy scale, and a higher score on this scale indicated a greater perception of legitimacy of the department. The Cronbach's alpha is reported in the preliminary analysis.

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# Procedure

This study was a 3x2 design examining the relationship between crisis type (one-time crisis vs. crisis in different negative history vs. lingering crisis), response type (apology vs. denial) on public perceptions of police. The study was conducted on Qualtrics and was available to those who receive the link for the survey through the snowball recruitment process.

Participants first read an informed consent statement describing the nature of the study (Appendix C). Participants were required to mark a box representing that they understood the risks and are 18 years of age or older. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves as a citizen residing within the community of Westwell under the Westwell Police Department.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions: (1) one-time crisis, apology; (2) one-time crisis, denial; (3) crisis with different negative history, apology; (4) crisis with different negative history, denial; (5) lingering crisis, apology; (6) lingering crisis, denial. Crisis scenarios were written in the form of a news story and were kept as similar as possible except to accommodate for the slight variations in the different crises (See Appendix A).

After reading of the scenarios, participants answered manipulation check questions, questions measuring general attitude to the police department before the response (Appendix B). Participants were then exposed to the response (Appendix A) followed by manipulation check questions and questions measuring general attitudes after the response and the dimensions of perceived legitimacy (Appendix B). Lastly, the questionnaire concluded with

demographic questions. In both parts of the questionnaire, participants were instructed to answer the questions as if they were members of the Westwell community and to focus their answers on the Westwell Police Department.

# Chapter 3:
# Results

## Preliminary Analysis

After removing incomplete data, a total of 191 participants remained for preliminary data analysis. For the manipulation check for the crisis types, there was a significant difference between the participants that answered correctly and the participants that answered incorrectly. A total of 63 participants incorrectly answered this manipulation check. These participants were kept in the sample because it is quite possible that participants interpreted the content of the scenarios using their own assumptions about the police, regardless of being instructed to only think about the police department depicted in the scenario. When looking more closely at the crisis types, the significant differences appeared mostly between the one-time crisis and the lingering crisis. Given the large amount of incorrect responses for the manipulation check, participants' assumptions and past experiences may have played a role. For this reason, the independent variable of crisis type was turned into the independent variable of

perception of crisis type. The theory of Social Construction sheds some light on how meaning is created, and why people have different interpretations (Berger & Luckmann, 1990). This theory contends that there are multiple realities, there are "innumerable…interpretations about everyday reality" because reality is experienced and understood subjectively through different experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1990, p 34). So, a possible explanation is that, when reading the one-time crisis scenario, participants' previous assumptions about police departments may have led them to assume that the police department must have a history, making the participants confuse the one-time crisis and the lingering crisis. These assumptions are a part of human nature and could not have been avoided.

For the crisis response manipulation check, 24 participants were deleted for responding incorrectly. There was no significant pattern detected among the answers of those participants that were deleted. The presence of multivariate outliers was investigated using Mahalanobis distance. There are only two outliers found and their influence on the overall scores does not seem extreme. Therefore, the data analyses for the main hypotheses was continued.

All of the reversed items that were included in the survey (Appendix B) were removed. These items were not answered as expected, and when they were removed, there were no significant changes in the results. Without the removed items, this left three items measuring general attitude before the response, four items measuring general attitudes after the response, and nine items in the perceived legitimacy scale.

A Cronbach's alpha coefficient that is above .7 indicates that this is a good a measure with good internal reliability (DeVellis, 2003). The Cronbach's alpha for the 9 items of the perceived

legimacy scale (after excluding reversed items) was .872. Removing the statement "I should do what the police tell me to do even when I do not like the way they treat people like me" increased the Cronbach's alpha. With eight items in the final perceived legitimacy scale the determined Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .881.

The final sample consisted of 167 participants. The majority of the sample, 103 participants, were female and 60 were male, and five participants did not choose a gender. About 8 out of every 10 participants indicated that they were U.S. citizens, and also indicated that English was their first language. Nearly half of all participants fell within the 18-24 age range. The 25-34 age range was the second largest with 39 participants and the third largest age range was 45-54 with 12 participants. There were even 4 participants in the 65-74 age range.

When ethnicities were divided into groups, 107 of the participants were White, 25 were Black, and 33 were of another ethnicity. Due to the small sample size in other ethnicities besides White, there is a chance that the results may be invalid. All analyses were first run with all ethnicities followed by the same analysis run again with the White only group.

For each multivariate test, Multicollinearity tests were conducted, and there no multicollinearity test issues were detected.

# Results

**H1a** and **H1b** predicted the impact of the interpretation of crisis type on the general attitudes and the perceived legitimacy of the police department. To test H1a and H1b, a multivariate analysis of

variance was first conducted to explore the general attitudes before the response. Three items were used to measure the general attitude towards the police department before the participants were exposed to the crisis response. There was no violation of homogenous variance assumptions. There was a statistically significant effect for interpretation of crisis type on the general attitude before the response [$F(2, 164) = 4.67$, $p = .00$; Wilks' Lambda = .84; $\eta^2 = .08$]. Looking at the variables separately, three of the variables reached significance: the extent to which the participant has a good feeling about the WPD [$F(2, 164) = 12.71$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .13$]; the extent to which the participant admired and respected the WPD [$F(2, 164) = 5.37$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .06$]; the extent to which it is believed the WPD would treat people like them fairly and justly [$F(2, 162) = 6.39$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .07$]; and the extent to which the WPD cannot be relied upon to keep its promises to people like them [$F(2, 164) = 3.35$, $p = .04$; $\eta^2 = .04$]. Trends in the means revealed that general attitudes before the response were significantly more positive for interpretations for the one-time crisis compared to the interpretations of the lingering crisis. Additionally, general attitudes before the response tended to be significantly more positive for interpretations of the differing crisis when compared to interpretations of the lingering crisis. Means are reported in Table 1.

A second MANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of the interpretation of crisis type on the general attitude after the response. Four items were used to measure the general attitude toward the police department after the participants viewed response, which were the dependent variables. There was no significant effect of interpretation of crisis type on general attitude after the response ($p > .05$).

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A one-way analysis of variance was used to investigate the impact of interpretation of crisis type on the perceived legitimacy scale. There was no significant effect of the interpretation of crisis type on perceived legitimacy ($p > .05$). With all ethnicities, **H1a** and **H1b** were partially supported.

[Table 1] Summary of significant means and standard deviations of outcome variables:
Effect of interpretation of crisis type on general attitudes before response

| Variable | Perceived One-time crisis | Perceived Differing crisis | Perceived Lingering crisis |
|---|---|---|---|
| I have a good feeling about the WPD | *3.77 (1.38)* | *3.19 (1.29)* | *2.26 (1.15)* |
| I admire and respect the WPD | *3.68 (1.62)* | *3.54 (1.43)* | *2.68 (1.51)* |
| The WPD treats people like me fairly | *4.58 (1.57)* | 4.02 (1.32) | *3.34 (1.65)* |

*Note.* Numbers in Italic bold = statistically significant

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Analyses for H1a and H1b were also conducted with a sample of just the White participants. A MANOVA was performed to investigate the effect of interpretation of crisis type on the three dependent variables measuring the general attitude before the response. There was no significant effect ($p > .05$).

A MANOVA was next conducted with the White participants group to examine the effect of the interpretation of crisis type on the four dependent variables measuring general attitude after the response. There was no significant effect of the interpretation of crisis type on the general attitude after the response ($p > .05$).

An ANOVA was conducted with the White participants group to examine the effect of the interpretation of crisis type on the perceived legitimacy scale, and there was also no significant effect ($p > .05$). With White participants only, **H1a** and **H1b** were not supported.

**H2** was tested to investigate the impact of the crisis response on the general attitudes and the perceived legitimacy of the police department. To test H2, a MANOVA was conducted to explore the general attitudes after the response. The Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was violated ($p = .00$), so the Pillai's Trace multivariate test was used as Pillai's Trace is known to be relatively robust to the violation of homogenous variance assumption. There was a significant effect of the response type on the general attitudes of the participants after the response [$F(1, 165) = 24.43$, $p = .00$; Pillai's Trace = .38; $\eta^2 = .38$]. Looking at the variables separately, all four variables reached significance: the extent to which the WPD is telling the truth in the response [$F(1, 165) = 97.96$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .37$]; the extent to which the participants had a good feeling about the WPD [$F(1, 165) = 43.77$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .21$]; the extent to which the

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participant admired and respected the WPD [$F(1, 165) = 29.62, p = .00; \eta^2 = .15$]; and the extent to which the WPD would treat people like them fairly and justly [$F(1, 165) = 13.21, p = .00; \eta^2 = .07$]. Trends in the means revealed that those who received an apology had significantly more positive general attitudes after the response when compared to those who received a denial. Means are reported in Table 2.

An ANOVA was conducted for H2 to explore the impact of the crisis response on perceived legitimacy scale. There was no significant effect ($p > 05$). With all ethnicities, **H2** was partially supported.

[Table 2] Summary of significant means and standard deviations of outcome variables: Effect of crisis response type on general attitudes after response

| Variable | Apology | Denial |
|---|---|---|
| WPD was telling the truth in the response | 5.15 (1.08) | 3.26 (1.35) |
| I have a good feeling about the WPD | 4.24 (1.43) | 2.78 (1.43) |
| I admire and respect the WPD | 4.12 (1.43) | 2.87 (1.54) |
| The WPD treats people like me fairly | 4.32 (1.37) | 3.55 (1.38) |

Analyses for **H2** were also conducted with a sample of just the White participants. A MANOVA was conducted to evaluate the impact of the response type on the six dependent variables measuring general attitudes towards the police department after the response. There was no violation of homogenous variance assumptions. There was a significant effect for response type on general attitudes after the response [$F(1, 105) = 13.11$, $p = .00$; Wilks' Lambda = .66; $\eta^2 = .34$]. Looking at the variables separately, three of the four variables reached significance: the extent to which the WPD is telling the truth in the response [$F(1, 105) = 47.74$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .31$]; the extent to which the participant has a good feeling about the WPD [$F(1, 105) = 25.84$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .20$]; and the extent to which the participant admired and respected the WPD [$F(1, 105) = 11.80$ $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .13$]. Similar to the results found with all ethnicities, those who received an apology had significantly more positive general attitudes after the response compared to those who received a denial. Means are reported in Table 3.

An ANOVA with the White participants group was also conducted to examine the effect of the crisis response on the perceived legitimacy scale. There was no significant effect ($p > 05$). With White participants only, **H2** was partially supported.

[Table 3] Summary of significant means and standard deviations of outcome variables:
Effect of crisis response on general attitudes after response, White only participants

| Variable | Apology | Denial |
|---|---|---|
| WPD was telling the truth in the response | 5.11 (1.18) | 3.47 (1.27) |
| I have a good feeling about the WPD | 4.42 (1.43) | 2.96 (1.52) |
| I admire and respect the WPD | 4.13 (1.51) | 3.07 (1.67) |

A race effect was seen when dividing participants' race as White vs. Black vs. Other Ethnicities. **H3** was tested to investigate the impact that the participants' race (White vs. Black vs. Other) had on the general attitudes and the perceived legitimacy of the police department.

A multivariate analysis of covariance was performed to investigate the effect of race on the general attitude before the response. The dependent variables were five items measuring general attitude before the response. There was no violation of homogenous variance assumptions. After controlling for the response as the covariate variable, there was a significant effect for race on the general attitudes before the response [$F(2, 161) = 4.84$, $p = .00$; Wilks' Lambda = .84; $\eta^2 = .08$]. Looking at the variables separately, two of the three variables reached significance: the extent to which the participant has a good feeling about the WPD [$F(2, 162) = 6.62$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .08$] and the extent to which the WPD would treat people like them fairly and justly [$F(2, 162) = 11.76$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .13$]. Trends in the means revealed that White participants and participants of other ethnicities had significantly more positive attitudes before the response compared to Black participants. The post hoc tests showed that the significant differences were between White and Black participants and between Black participants and participants of other races. Means are reported in Table 4.

A MANCOVA, controlling for the response, was next performed to investigate the impact of race on general attitude after the response. The Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was violated (p = .00), so the Pillai's Trace multivariate test was used. There was a significant effect for race on the general attitude after the response [$F(2, 161) = 4.79$, $p = .00$; Pillai's Trace = .17; $\eta^2 = .08$].

Looking at the variables separately, two of the four dependent variables measuring general attitude after the response: the extent to which the participant has a good feeling about the WPD [$F(2, 162) = 4.04$, $p = .019$; $\eta^2 = .05$] and the extent to which the WPD would treat people like them fairly and justly [$F(2, 162) = 6.16$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .07$]. Trends in the means revealed that White participants had significantly more positive attitudes after the response compared to Black participants. According to the post hoc tests, significant differences were only between White and Black participants. Means are reported in Table 4.

[Table 4] Summary of means and standard deviations of outcome variables:
Effect of race on general attitudes before and after response

| Variable | White | Black | Other |
|---|---|---|---|
| Before Response | | | |
| I have a good feeling about the WPD | *3.24 (1.35)* | *2.20 (1.26)* | *3.27 (1.33)* |
| The WPD treats people like me fairly | *4.33 (1.37)* | *2.88 (1.74)* | *3.64 (1.27)* |
| After the Response | | | |
| I have a good feeling about the WPD | *3.80 (1.63)* | *2.84 (1.43)* | 3.42 (1.44) |
| The WPD treats people like me fairly | *4.21 (1.26)* | *3.16 (1.68)* | 3.76 (1.54) |

*Note.* Numbers in Italic bold = statistically significant

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An ANOVA was performed for H3 to investigate the effect of race on the perceived legitimacy scale. There was no violation of homogenous variance assumptions. There was a significant effect for race on perceived legitimacy [$F(2, 162) = 9.26$, $p = .00$; $\eta^2 = .10$]. Comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that White participants scored significantly higher on the perceived legitimacy scale compared to Black participants. Additionally, participants of other races also scored significantly higher compared to Black participants. There was not a significant difference between White participants and participants of other races. Means are presented in Figure 1. These results support **H3**.
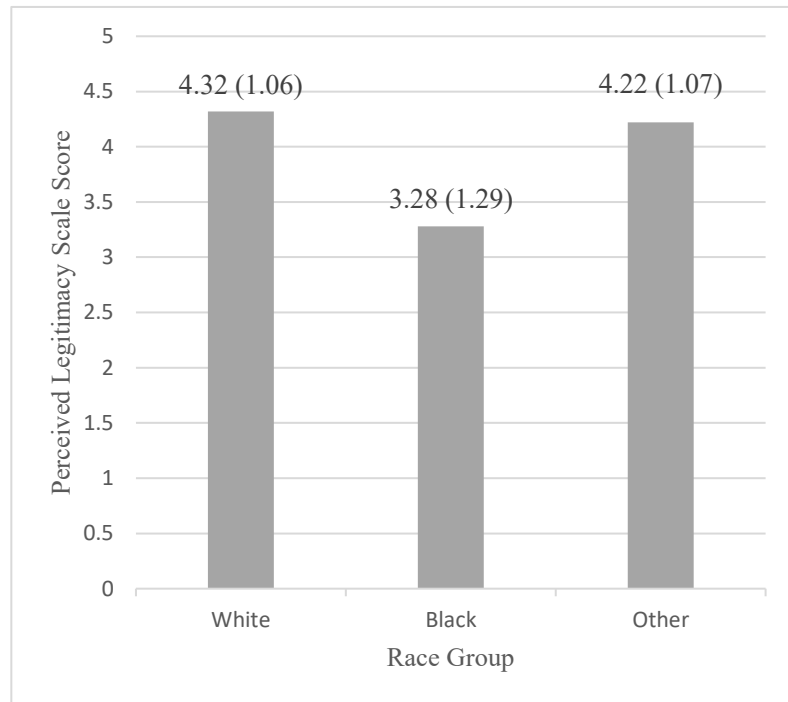


*Figure 1*. Means and standard deviations for impact of race on perceived legitimacy score

# Chapter 4: Discussion

       The general attitudes of the participants toward the police department were measured before and after the response was given, and perceived legitimacy was also measured after the response to investigate the impact of the interpretations of crisis types and the type of response issued by the police department. Analysis of the data showed support for the hypotheses and for previous research. The initial hypotheses included the manipulation of crisis type, however, about one-third of the participants incorrectly answered the manipulation check for crisis type. According to the theory of Social Construction, individuals interpret reality through lenses that are shaped by different experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1990). For example, researchers interviewed 58 employees at a financial company and found that age and amount of personal use of social media influenced their perceptions of implementing social media in the workplace (Treem, Dailey, Pierce, & Leonardi, 2015). Given the possibility that participants' previous assumptions and experiences with police departments could have influenced their perceptions of the

fictitious department depicted in the scenario, the independent variable of *crisis type* was turned into *interpretation of crisis type*.

Not only did interpretations of a one-time crisis produce the most positive attitudes, interpretations of a lingering crisis produced the least positive attitudes about the police department depicted in the scenarios. A one-time crisis, in which a single crisis occurs after a history without experiencing any crises, tends to be viewed as temporary instability on part of the organization and tends to be viewed more positively compared to different crisis types (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Termed in this study as a lingering crisis, the same crisis that continues to occur would be one that is viewed as being more predictably persistent, and as something that could be avoided, compared to crises that only occur once (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, Griffin, 1994). If something is viewed as avoidable, and something could have been done to prevent the crisis from occurring again, positive attitudes may not be as high. Results revealed that interpretations of a one-time crisis produced the most positive attitudes, interpretations of a differing crisis produced less positive attitudes compared to one-time crisis interpretations, but more positive attitudes compared to lingering crisis interpretations. This meant that interpretations of a lingering crisis produced the least positive attitudes before participants read the response.

However, results were not significant for the impact of interpretations of crisis type on the general attitudes after exposure to the response, nor where results significant for perceived legitimacy. This could be because the attitudes towards the department were strongest immediately after reading the crisis scenario. The impact of the crisis and interpretations of the crisis could have become diluted

or forgotten by the time the participants read the response and by the time participants started answering the second wave of questions.

Additionally, interpretations of crisis types had no significant effect when comparing White participants to themselves. This could be because, overall, White participants tended to have more positive attitudes towards police departments when compared to Black participants and participants of other races. For example, White participants were more likely to believe that the department would treat people like them fairly and justly, and were more likely to believe that the police department was legitimate and that they should obey the department's decisions when compared to the other two race groups. These positive attitudes and confidence in the police, seen in White participants, may be strong enough to remain intact, regardless of the crisis type.

Analysis also revealed that an apology produced more positive attitudes after the response compared to a denial, which agreed with previous literature (Bradford & Garret, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Dean, 2004). However, results were not significant when analyzing for perceived legitimacy. Similarly, with only the White participants, perceived legitimacy was not significant. Legitimacy, composed of the attitudes and expectations that the public has about the procedural fairness and lawfulness of the conduct of a department and its officers, is essential to maintain order and safety in a community (Cook, 2015; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Mazerolle, Antrobus, & Bennett, 2013; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Across all analyses, legitimacy was only found significant when controlling for the response and the race groups were compared to each other. It is possible that a response after a crisis *improved* attitudes about the

department, but it was not enough to restore the department as legitimate.

Looking more closely at the impact of participants' race on attitudes and perceived legitimacy, non-White participants had less positive attitudes before and after the response and had lower perceived legitimacy compared to White participants. Black participants had the least positive attitudes before and after the response and the lowest perceived legitimacy towards the police department, while White participants, had the most positive attitudes and the highest perceived legitimacy. This is consistent with a large amount of previous research exploring the role of race in perceptions of police (Weitzer, 1997).

# Limitations

A major limitation of this study was the sample. White participants made up much of the sample, 107 participants out of 167 participants in the total sample. Additionally, sampling began as a snowball method, however, this method did not acquire as many participants as expected, so additional recruitment was done on social media through Facebook and Twitter, and by offering a gift card on an online forum of a private southeastern university. Although there was a wide age range, the sample was not completely random, so the sample in this study was not one that could produce generalizable results since it is not representative of a larger population.

The intention of using a fake police department in the scenarios was to avoid participants' preconceived assumptions and opinions about police departments in real life to skew their

perceptions of the one in the scenario. However, this strategy may not have been completely successful due to large amount of incorrect responses for the crisis type manipulation check and having to change the independent variable of crisis type to interpretation of crisis type.

Additionally, the scenarios describing the crisis type may have been too ambiguous, allowing participants to fill in gaps with their own experiences with police departments.

# Implications and Future Research

The research in this study holds important implications for the field of public relations. Public relations can be described as intentionally and strategically communicating to reaching a specific outcome, while allowing the public to respond to the message (Russel & Lamme, 2016). An officer-involved shooting is a crisis that a police department would have to deal with, and the strategies involved in public relations is one way to possibly approach it because the department has the ability to strategically construct messages to reach the goal of repairing its image, and the public has the ability to react to that message.

As seen in this study, as well as previous research, apologies tend to produce more positive reactions from the public. Construction of the message should also be taken into account interpretations of the public. In the situation of a police department trying to express a message with a specific goal, it appears best that the message be strict and clear to avoid any ambiguousness. Removing ambiguity may be able to prevent assumptions from playing a role in understanding a police department's crisis and any messages that follow. Additionally,

it is evident, in this and previous research, that an apology may be better to include in a message to the public, instead of denial of responsibility for the crisis. it would be even more difficult than a department trying to recover from a crisis that occurs after several other different types of crises. It may be harder for a police department to restore a positive image if it has experienced many of the same crises. Restoring a positive image may be easiest after a single crisis occurs, which should then be followed by an apology.

Future research is needed to investigate lingering crises since this is the first time this type of crisis has been termed in that manner. Research is needed to investigate lingering crises when paired with different types of responses and with different types of organizations. Also, considering previous research highlighting the importance of legitimacy, future research may need to focus on improving perceived legitimacy rather than merely general attitudes.

# Conclusion

Officer-involved shootings may not make the biggest headlines among politics and natural disasters, but that does not mean that they don't occur. Recently, Jamarco McShann, a black man, was shot and killed in Ohio by two officers (Garbe, 2017). The officers were investigating a suspicious vehicle on October 20, 2017 when McShann was killed. There is no doubt that this type of crisis, one that is lingering, continues to occur. Given the frequency of officer involved shootings, and the severity of fatal incidences, it is possible that departments who only experience a crisis once may be automatically grouped by the public with departments that are

experiencing the lingering crisis. It could be becoming more difficult for the public to isolate departments from one another, and, now, one might have to say that police departments, as an industry, are experiencing a lingering crisis.

This research is a step forward to developing effective communication strategies to help restore positive attitudes towards police departments after experiencing a crisis, especially a string of crises that may be difficult to overcome. The relationship between the public and the police, and the perceptions that the public has about the police, are crucial to maintain the order and safety within a community. This research provides the opportunity to make communities better and safer.

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# Appendix A

## Crisis: One-Time Crisis

<u>Breaking News</u>

## Man Dies in Hospital after Confrontation with Officer Downtown

By: Westwell Press
January 10, 2017        4:35am


Westwell – Hours ago, a man was sent to Westwell General Hospital with severe head trauma after a confrontation with a Westwell police officer. Responding to a noise complaint outside a local bar, Officer Mill and Officer Howard quickly approached two men. Witnesses claim they were talking calmly when Officer Mill and one of the men got physical. Witnesses were not able to say how the physical altercation began, however, Officer Mill used his nightstick to bring the man to the ground.

"We were cooperating when the cop hit him for no reason, and just kept hitting him and beating him to bloody pulp," reported the man's friend. "It was just another black man getting beat by a cop," he added. Paramedics were called when the man could not stand after hand cuffs were put on. Soon after arriving at the hospital, it was confirmed that the man did not survive from his head injuries.

This is the first time that the Westwell Police Department has experienced an incident in which a confrontation with a WPD officer has resulted in the death of a civilian. This type of behavior is not often seen in Westwell and comes as a surprise. Further investigation must be done by the department to determine how the physicality started.

# Crisis: Differing Crisis

## Man Dies in Hospital after Confrontation with Officer Downtown

By: Westwell Press
January 10, 2017        4:35am

Westwell –  Hours ago, a man was sent to Westwell General Hospital with severe head trauma after a confrontation with a Westwell police officer. Responding to a noise complaint outside a local bar, Officer Mill and Officer Howard quickly approached two men. Witnesses claim they were talking calmly when Officer Mill and one of the men got physical. Witnesses were not able to say how the physical altercation began, however, Officer Mill used his nightstick to bring the man to the ground.

"We were cooperating when the cop hit him for no reason, and just kept hitting him and beating him to bloody pulp," reported the man's friend. "It was just another black man getting beat by a cop," he added. Paramedics were called when the man could not stand after hand cuffs were put on. Soon after arriving at the hospital, it was confirmed that the man did not survive from his head injuries.

The department has previously been accused of frequently making unwarranted traffic stops in the past. However, this is the first occurrence in which a confrontation with a WPD officer has resulted in the death of a civilian. Further investigation must be done by the department to determine how the physicality started.

<u>Breaking News</u>

## Man Dies in Hospital after Confrontation with Officer Downtown

By: Westwell Press
January 10, 2017       4:35am

Westwell – Hours ago, a man was sent to Westwell General Hospital with severe head trauma after a confrontation with a Westwell police officer. Responding to a noise complaint outside a local bar, Officer Mill and Officer Howard quickly approached two men. Witnesses claim they were talking calmly when Officer Mill and one of the men got physical. Witnesses were not able to say how the physical altercation began, however, Officer Mill used his nightstick to bring the man to the ground.

"We were cooperating when the cop hit him for no reason, and just kept hitting him and beating him to bloody pulp," reported the man's friend. "It was just another black man getting beat by a cop," he added. Paramedics were called when the man could not stand after hand cuffs were put on. Soon after arriving at the hospital, it was confirmed that the man did not survive from his head injuries.

This is not the first occurrence in which a confrontation with a WPD officer has resulted in the death of a civilian. This is the third recorded death of a civilian that has occurred with the involvement of a WPD officer in that past two years. Further investigation must be done by the department to determine how the physicality started.

# Responses

| Apology | Denial |
|---|---|
| UPDATE<br>January 10, 2017 12:47pm<br><br>Westwell – The Westwell Police Department has just made a statement regarding the man who was fatally beaten after a confrontation with a WPD officer.<br><br>"Officer Mill did not act correctly in how he handled Mr. Washington when he may not have been supposedly cooperating. I would like to apologize to Mr. Washington's family for the injustice they have experienced. This is not what the WPD stands for and will not be tolerated," said Police Chief Martin Smith in his press release. Officer David Mill will continue to be under investigation inside the department while he has been currently placed on administrative leave. threat and was | UPDATE<br>January 10, 2017 12:47pm<br><br>Westwell – The Westwell Police Department has just made a statement regarding the man who was fatally beaten after a confrontation with a WPD officer.<br><br>"I know my officer took the appropriate actions to defend himself and his partner against Mr. Washington. I believe my officer when he says that Washington was verbally aggressive and advanced on Mill and his partner. He did what he had to do to protect himself and the people around him," said Police Chief Martin Smith in his press release. |

# Appendix B

## Part One of Questionnaire

1. Select the statement that most accurately describes the situation of the Westwell Police Department in the article that you just read.
   a. The WPD has never experienced an incident in the past
   b. The WPD has experienced other incidents in the past, but are not the same as the one that is the focus of the article
   c. The WPD has experienced many of these same kinds of incidents in the past
2. How serious was the harm done to the civilian?
3. How much damage does this situation cause the community?
4. How responsible is the police department for this crisis?
5. How responsible is the civilian for this crisis?
6. How much was the police department able to prevent a situation like this?

7. I have a good feeling about the Westwell Police Department.
8. I admire and respect the Westwell police Department.
9. Most people like me would be unhappy with their interactions with the WPD. (Reversed)
10. I would feel that the WPD treats people like me fairly and justly.
11. The Westwell Police Department cannot be relied on to keep its promises to people like me. (Reversed)

## Part Two of Questionnaire

1. Based on the news update that you just read, how are the police responding to this situation?
2. Based on the news article and response that you read, of what race do you think is the police officer?
3. The department is telling the truth in the Chief's response.
4. I have a good feeling about the Westwell Police Department.
5. I admire and respect the Westwell police Department.
6. Most people like me would be unhappy with their interactions with the WPD. (Reversed)
7. I would feel that the WPD treats people like me fairly and justly.

8. The Westwell Police Department cannot be relied on to keep its promises to people like me. (Reversed)

9. The police use rules and procedures that are not fair to everyone. (Reversed)
10. The police make decisions on facts, rather than their own personal opinions.
11. The police would treat you with respect if you had contact with them for any reason.
12. I should accept the decisions made by the police, even if I think they are wrong.
13. I should do what the police tell me to do even when I do not like the way they treat people like me.
14. There are times when it is ok for me to ignore what the police tell me. (Reversed)
15. The law represents the values of the people in power, rather that the values of people like me. (Reversed)
16. People in power use the law to try to control people like me. (Reversed)
17. The law does not protect my interests. (Reversed)
18. Overall, the Westwell Police Department is a legitimate authority and people should obey the decisions that the WPD officers make.
19. I have confidence that the WPD can do its job well.
20. People's basic rights are protected by the police.
21. The police care about the well-being of everyone they deal with.
22. I agree with many of the values that define what the WPD stands for.
23. The police are often dishonest. (Reversed)

# Demographics

1. What is your gender? (Nominal)
2. What is your race/ethnicity? (Nominal)
3. Are you a United States Citizen? (Nominal)
4. What is your age? (Scale)
5. Is English your first language? (Nominal)
6. Are you currently enrolled in a school/university? (Nominal)
7. Education Level (Nominal)
8. Please indicate your political affiliation on the scale (Scale)

# Appendix C

## Informed Consent

Purpose of the study:
The goal of this research is to examine public perceptions of police departments.

If you agree to participate, you will be presented with a brief news article and will be later asked about your opinions regarding the actions of the department in response to a crisis.

Risks and benefits:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this research. You are free to leave questions unanswered or to leave the survey before finishing it.

Confidentiality:
Your survey responses will be anonymous and confidential. Qualtrics does collect IP (internet protocol) addresses automatically, and although these alone cannot explicitly identify you, they will be deleted immediately upon data collection.

Please note that your identifying information may be collected if your personal internet activity is being monitored by a third party. Such monitoring is beyond the researcher's control or responsibility.

More information:
If you have questions at any time about the survey or its procedures, you may contact Brigitte Bonaci by email at bbonaci2012@my.fit.edu. This research has been approved by Florida Institute of Technology's Institutional Review Board and information regarding the conduct and review of research involving humans may be obtained from the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Lisa Steelman, at (321) 674-8104.

Clicking on the link to begin the survey indicates that you agree to participate in this research and that:

1. You are 18 years of age or older.
2. You have read and understand the information provided above.
3. You understand that participation is voluntary.

4. You understand that you are free to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for your time and support. Please start with the survey now by clicking on the Continue button below.