Children’s perceptions of the role of police: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT
A qualitative methodology, using open-ended questions, was employed to explore the perceptions of 112 children regarding the role of police. The children, aged 5 to 6 and 7 to 8 years, were asked to comment on what police officers do when they go to work, what direct and indirect experiences they have had with the police, and the positive and negative aspects of being a police officer. The findings revealed that children emphasise the punitive role of police; very few children identified with non-punitive roles. This punitive theme was evident irrespective of the children’s experiences, age, and whether they could recall television shows involving police. The practical implications of our findings for police relations with children, particularly in a forensic interview context, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION
In any established community, police organisations have a central role. However, the public’s opinion of what that central role should be has not always aligned with police opinion (Ainsworth, 1995, p. 216). In a UK Operational Policing Review (Joint Consultative Committee, 1990, as cited in Ainsworth, 1995) the public were...
clear in wanting a police force with a ‘human face’. In contrast, the police valued the use of technology and fast response times in dealing with law enforcement and crime control. With crimes becoming much more sophisticated and complex, the police role in Australia, and indeed in other Western countries, has developed and changed over time to meet the demands and the needs of governments and the community (see Wang & Li, 2005). It is not surprising therefore, that public perceptions of and attitudes toward the police have been researched extensively in most Western countries such as the US (Brown & Benedict, 2002), and Australia (Boni, 1995), with the first survey to rate citizens’ opinions of police being developed over 70 years ago (Parrott, 1936). Moreover, several police organisations in Australia, and other Western countries, have made attempts to provide community visits whereby police officers are available to discuss the work they do with the public (Hopkins, 1994; Hopkins, Hewstone, & Hantzi, 1992).

Perceptions of the police are of interest to governments because public distrust or disapproval of the police may impact negatively on the enforcement of law and order. Citizens are less likely to contact the police or ask for help if they doubt the professional integrity of police officers (hence compromising their safety), and negative attitudes of the police can lead to hostility toward the police (eg, urban riots) with deleterious effects (Brown & Benedict, 2002). Moreover, given that community policing can only be successful if the community works in partnership with the police to prevent neighbourhood crimes (Giles, Willeynys, Gallois, & Chernikoff Anderson, 2006), the importance of positive and accurate perceptions of the role of police are critical. This is true not only of adults but children as well. Given that we know young children’s preconceptions about the humanities often include stereotypes, such as history being a struggle between the ‘baddies’ and the ‘goodies’ (Gardner, 1991), and that such misconceptions can persist even among older adolescent children (DiSessa, 1982), accurate perceptions of the police need to be established in the early years of childhood.

Limited prior research has examined children’s experiences of police in general and what they perceive the police role to be. In a qualitative exploration of children’s perceptions of personal safety issues, Briggs and Hawkins (1993) reported that 5- to 8-year-olds felt the police were far too busy ‘arresting robbers, taking them to jail, and dealing with accidents’ (p. 6) to come to the rescue of a lost child. Wright et al. (1995) also interviewed children using both cued-recall and closed questions, but they did so in the context of exploring real-life or television schemata for two occupations, policing and nursing. While children of all ages felt that police on television were more involved in dealing with crimes and catching criminals, were more sex-typed and more exciting than real police officers, both television and real police were perceived to be equally likely to get hurt and use guns.

In a more recent study, Low and Durkin (2001) examined children’s perceptions of police using an experimental design. They randomly divided children of various ages to a television or ‘real-life’ condition and then showed children a series of 15-second clips from different police dramas. The clips depicted four overrepresented police activities (eg, shooting guns, high-speed pursuit) and four underrepresented police activities (eg, interviewing, paper work). After each clip the children were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale (never to always) how often police conducted the activity depicted. The children were also asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale (never to every week) ‘how often they had viewed police shows in the last six months’ (p. 203).
The extent of learning from television and real life was measured by asking: ‘how much of what they know about what police do come from watching TV . . . or from observing real life police’ (p. 203) on a five-point Likert scale (nothing to everything). The findings revealed that children of all ages view the frequency of overrepresented police activity in television shows as being indicative of what is occurring in the real world of policing, whereas the police activities underrepresented on television are perceived as occurring infrequently in real life. Furthermore, perceived extent of learning about policing from television predicted children’s estimates of overrepresented and underrepresented police activities in both conditions (especially for the youngest children); perceived extent of learning from observing real life police did not predict accurate perceptions of the role of police in real life.

Taken together, the prior research suggests that elementary school-age children focus predominantly on the punitive role of police (Briggs & Hawkins, 1993; Low & Durkin, 2001; Wright et al., 1995). However, there are several methodological limitations that must be noted. The principal focus of Briggs and Hawkins’s (1993) and Wright et al.’s (1995) studies was not children’s perceptions of the role of police; hence, neither of these studies provided a detailed qualitative analysis of this topic. Wright et al. also used a large proportion of directive questions which focused the child on criminal and punitive aspects of policing (eg, ‘How often do police officers use their guns?’, p. 1710). Similarly, the children’s emphasis on the punitive role of policing in Low and Durkin’s (2001) study may have been driven by the direct and leading nature of the questioning used. For example, the punitive aspects of policing shown on television are dramatic, sensational and are usually violent, such as shooting guns and arresting a criminal. Hence, it is possible that these televised images primed children to think of these punitive aspects of policing as real rather than fantasy (ie, created by television producers for a non-reality television programme; Bushman & Huesmann, 2001; Ceci, Powell, & Principe, 2002; Davies, 1997).

In response to the above-mentioned concerns, the current study focused specifically and systematically on children’s perceptions of the role of police using non-leading broad open-ended questions to encourage elaborate responses. Specifically, the aim of this paper was twofold. First, it examined the extent to which the emphasis on the punitive role across various ages is generalisable when children are invited to describe the police role in their own words. Second, it examined the nature of children’s prior experiences with police, and their potential implications for police relations with children, particularly in a forensic interview context.

METHOD

Participants
112 children (64 females and 48 males) were recruited through letters to parents that were distributed by teachers in five primary schools in a Metropolitan area of Australia (a range of demographic areas was selected). Only children whose parents gave informed consent participated. 43 children were 5 to 6 years of age (M age = 71.88 months; SD = 3.53 months, range = 64 months to 79 months). 69 children were 7 to 8 years of age (M age = 96.86 months; SD = 4.12 months, range = 88 months to 104 months).

Materials and procedure
Following university ethics approval and written informed consent from the children’s parents, the children were individually questioned (for 15 to 20 minutes) in a
quiet room at their school by a researcher with experience in interviewing children. A semi-structured interview schedule, consisting of non-leading broad open-ended questions, was used to generate discussion about the children’s perceptions of the policing role and the positive and negative aspects of being a police officer. Consistent with best-practice interview guidelines (e.g., Powell, 2003), the interviewer did not assume that the children had prior knowledge of, or experience with, the police. This was established initially prior to each open-ended question. Specifically, the interview guide consisted of the following questions: (a) ‘Do you know what a police officer does when they go to work?’ If yes; ‘Tell me about what they do’; (b) ‘Would you like to be a police officer?’ ‘Why/Why not?’ ‘Tell me more about that’; (c) ‘Have you ever seen a real-life police officer before?’ If yes; ‘Tell me about when you saw the police officer’. ‘Has there been any other time you’ve seen a police officer?’ etc. ‘Has a police officer ever visited your school?’ If yes; ‘Tell me about that visit’; (d) ‘Have you seen any TV shows with a police officer in it?’ ‘Tell me about that show’. ‘Have you seen any other TV shows with police officers in it?’, etc.

Coding
All of the interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and double-checked for accuracy. The first author immersed herself in the entire dataset, reading each transcript thoroughly in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants’ perceptions. A constant comparative approach that involved making continual comparisons between the age groups further enhanced the identification of key themes present within the data. A coding scheme was then developed in collaboration with the remaining two authors, who also read the transcripts in order to debate and discuss the emerging key themes. This collaborative analysis enabled a coding scheme to be developed that appropriately encapsulated the content of all interviews (Barbour, 2001).

All of the key themes were inductively derived and grounded within the dataset in agreement with principles of grounded theory (Browne & Sullivan, 1999). The responses were then analysed using content analysis, which involves grouping responses into specific categories which are then sorted and counted to identify the number of occurrences of each theme (Gifford, 1998). For example, in relation to the police role, six categories emerged: punitive; safety/protective; educative/informative; emergency response; investigative/evidence gathering; and helping/responding to crime.

RESULTS
All the children acknowledged that they knew what a police officer did and provided a response to the follow-up open-ended question. Table 1 reveals the mean number of responses given for each area of police work identified in the transcripts across the two age groups and overall (collapsed over age). What is immediately apparent from this table is that the disciplinary or corrective role of police (i.e., apprehending ‘bad’ people) was a central theme of the children’s accounts. The mean number of punitive responses provided was significantly greater than responses categorised as safety/protective (t(111) = 7.80; p < 0.001); educative/informative (t(111) = 17.62; p < 0.001); emergency response (t(111) = 9.23; p < 0.001); investigative (t(111) = 10.41; p < 0.001); and helping/responding to crime (t(111) = 15.45; p < 0.001). Anecdotally, the corrective role was described as a process commonly associated with violent activity (e.g., running after ‘baddies’, firing a gun).

The salience of the punitive role of police was also evident in four other ways.
First, when considering the proportion of children who mentioned punitive activities, the overwhelming majority of the younger (92 per cent) and older children (94 per cent) mentioned punitive activities when describing what police do when they go to work. Second, 77 per cent of younger children and 45 per cent of older children responded with a punitive activity as their first and immediate answer, when describing the police role. Third, 20 per cent of the children reported that police officers hurt others, albeit the older children were less likely to do this than the younger children. Finally, many of the children used violent descriptors (eg, killing, bashing, hurting) in their reports when describing the protective role of police. For some of the children, the punitive and violent aspects of policing were very salient indeed. For example, two of the older children and four of the younger children used over nine violent descriptors when describing the police role.

Take for example the following excerpt from an interview with a 7-year-old girl:

> when they see somebody doing something against the law they then put their siren over and they chase after them, and when they’ve got the person, they take them into court. Sometimes they actually spray with them and they put it in their eyes so like they don’t see the policeman. Then they have their stick and they bang the people and it nearly killed but like they hold them and they whack them . . . if the person that’s been naughty if they shoot the person with a gun or try to cut them with a knife they will have to try and shoot them . . . they [police] like hit people . . . chase under aged drivers, [police] handcuff and then really hurt them.

### Table 1: Total mean number of responses given for each functional work type across the two age groups and overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police role categories</th>
<th>Age group (years)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety/protective activities¹</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educative/informative activities</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency response activities</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigative activities²</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping/responding activities¹</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punitive activities</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

¹ = p < 0.05
² = p < 0.01
In all except one case, children mentioned the police killing other people without giving any reasonable explanation for the officers doing this (e.g., self-defence). Further, reference to killing was often made, as if it were a routine activity of police officers. For example one girl said:

Sometimes [the police] kill people. And they sometimes give people parking tickets. And they wait for people that rob the bank to come out of the bank so they’re around the corner and they can catch them. They sometimes direct the road.

Interestingly, for a large proportion of the children, the punitive and violent aspects of policing were perceived to be a negative aspect of the job. When asked whether they would like to be a police officer, 40 per cent of the younger children and 49 per cent of the older children said ‘no’. When explaining their response, 49 per cent of the younger and 74 per cent of the older children cited the punitive/dangerous elements as a reason (see Table 2). For example, one older girl said:

If people have been really bad, you’d have to shoot them. And it wouldn’t be good if people were trying to chase and kill you, and you couldn’t find a place to hide.

Whilst children in both age groups also identified that helping/saving/protecting is a positive aspect of policing, the frequencies were not as large as they were for the negative punitive responses (see Table 2).

So what experiences seem to be driving children’s negative perceptions of the police role? The answer to this was not so obvious within the transcripts. Although many children were able to report watching TV shows with police officers, TV did not appear to play a particularly prominent role in the children’s free reports of the police role. Only 33.3 per cent of the younger children and 44 per cent of the older children recalled watching any television programme at all with police in it, and only 17 per cent of the older children and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Prep positives</th>
<th>Prep negatives</th>
<th>Grade 2 positives</th>
<th>Grade 2 negatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punitive</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money/salary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help/save/protect</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work duties</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting people</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work load</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car/driving/sirens</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hero/rewards</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status/being in charge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniform</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40$^a$</td>
<td>34$^a$</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>71$^b$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

$^a$ Not all the younger children provided responses.

$^b$ Two of the older children gave two different types of responses.
30 per cent of the younger children recalled seeing punitive aspects of the police role when watching a children’s television programme with police. Among the many shows mentioned, serial ‘reality-based’ programmes were more likely to be mentioned (eg, the news, The Bill, Blue Heelers, Home and Away) as opposed to cartoons (eg, The Simpsons, Hey Arnold, Bob the Builder) or action thrillers (eg, James Bond, Terminator movies). Interestingly, one of the more disturbing television images described was news footage showing police officers apprehending terrorists who were wearing black balaclavas.

Overall, very few of the children in the current sample reported direct personal interaction with police officers. Only 33 per cent of the younger children and 29 per cent of the older children noted that they had ever spoken to a police officer about his or her job even though an officer had attended the school previously as part of school community liaison. Indeed, only 33 of the children (21 per cent) recalled a school/classroom visit by the police for educational purposes. Further, only 50 per cent of these children could recall what occurred, or what was discussed during the visit. Over half of the children (60 per cent) reported seeing the street and public work that police do in terms of ensuring safety, law enforcement and maintaining order (eg, patrolling the streets on foot or in police cars, in crowd control at sporting events, traffic infringements). Some children provided more diverse responses in relation to other times they had seen police officers (such as the police attending their house or school for a burglary, child’s family approaching the police to report something, the police conducting a door knock to get witness information); however, the frequency of these types of responses was very low (less than 7 per cent of children in the whole sample). Interestingly, the punitive and violent aspects of policing were noted even among those children who had a parent as a police officer. One 7-year-old boy whose father is a police officer claimed that:

[Police] have to catch burglars and chase them if they are going too fast . . . They arrest people. And you have to make sure no one gets out of the jail.

Alarmingly, one of the younger girls whose parents are both police officers mentioned that her mother had come into her class as part of a community school visit:

[she] talked about what police do, showed handcuffs and talked about capsi-cum spray.

DISCUSSION

The simple yet overriding theme to arise from this study is that children predominantly identify policing with the punitive role, such as arresting criminals, shooting guns, killing and hurting people. While the punitive role is a theme that has arisen from previous studies as well (eg, Low & Durkin, 2001; Wright et al., 1995), the unique contribution of this work is that it has shown this perception is evident irrespective of the questions used to elicit the children’s perspectives or the particular background characteristics of children. Indeed, the common aspects of coercive force and danger were emphasised consistently, even though we had a large and heterogeneous group of participants who had been visited by police within their school. Further, although the older children identified significantly more non-punitive functional roles of police than the younger children and were less likely to report that the police hurt others, the punitive theme was evident irrespective of the children’s experiences, age, and whether children could recall television shows involving police.
The heavy emphasis on punitive aspects of policing is concerning from a community relations/vocational perspective, particularly since the dangerous element of policing was perceived by many of the children to be a negative aspect of the job, and that those who conform to the tenets of the punitive stereotype when entering the profession are more likely to use force and coercion in their professional practice (Terrill, Paoline, & Manning, 2003). The children’s stereotype of police is also concerning for those professionals whose role it is to assist children and juveniles who are at potential risk of abuse. The reporting rate of sexual abuse is low in most Western countries and seems to be decreasing (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004). While there are a range of reasons for this, the police are often the first port of call for those victims of sexual assault and it is the police who investigate alleged offences. Therefore, how the police are perceived by people who report an assault has a major influence on willingness to testify, on interview outcome, and subsequent prosecution patterns (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004).

Further, research has established that the greater the perceived authority of a person (with authority being associated with fear of punishment), the more likely a child is to acquiesce in the perceived demands of that person (Powell, Wilson, Gibbons, & Croft, 2008) or accept false information that is suggested by the person (Tobey & Goodman, 1992). Misunderstandings about the professional’s role and the nature of the relationship can also be detrimental to the establishment of rapport between the child and interviewer, which is essential for maximising the accuracy and detail of children’s reports of events (see Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005 for review).

Given the robust nature of children’s stereotype of police, it is unlikely that its detrimental role on interview outcome could be overcome by simple ground rule instructions (eg, ‘I’m here to listen to you and help you’; Ellis, Powell, Thomson, & Jones, 2003), or ad hoc community visits to schools. Unfortunately, however, although research has highlighted the negative impact of police heightened authority on children’s responses (eg, Powell et al., 2008; Tobey & Goodman, 1992), little work has focused on identifying and testing the efficacy of models aimed at improving children’s perceptions of the police role. More realistic perceptions are likely to result from innovative and widespread partnerships between police organisations and schools/media organisations; partnerships that are dedicated to improving the perceptions of the entire community. Changing children’s perceptions is also likely to require global acknowledgement among all officers who come into contact with children of the importance of portraying an image that does not unnecessarily overemphasise the punitive role.

In conclusion, whilst previous research has explored children’s perceptions of the role of police, the primary focus of these studies has been on television genre and hence the questions asked and/or the experimental designs implemented may have primed children to the punitive aspects of policing. We have extended previous research by showing that when children are asked about the role of police, without the use of specific or leading questions, the punitive aspects of policing remain salient. Given the efforts of the police to engage the community and portray their diverse roles, it appears that the ‘public relations’ message is not getting through to young children. This has implications for issues involving the police and children. Young children are victims of crime, witnesses of crime and, to a lesser extent, perpetrators of crime (Jenkins, Seydlitz, Osofsky, & Fick, 1997). It is surprising to us that the impact of unrealistic perceptions of the police on
children’s recall during an interview has not been investigated. The findings here suggest that this is an important question for future research.

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