

Are Police as "Guardian" as They Should Be? Expectation-Reality Discrepancies Impact  
Perceptions of Legitimacy

by

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## ABSTRACT

Due to numerous instances of police brutality in the U.S., researchers and policymakers have urged police to shift their job orientation to become more guardian-oriented (i.e., prioritizing community safety and building relationships) and less warrior-oriented (i.e., prioritizing physical control and fighting crime). Using the group engagement model and the expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis, this study examined: (1) young adults' desire for police to be warrior- or guardian-oriented, (2) their perceptions of the extent to which police in their community are warrior- or guardian-oriented, and (3) the association between participants' perceptions of the discrepancy between what police in their community should be versus are perceived to actually be and police legitimacy. In this study, a racially and ethnically diverse sample of young adults aged 18-25 in the United States (N = 436) responded to a self-report survey. Participants preferred police to have more of a guardian than warrior orientation and reported that police are not as guardian oriented as they wanted them to be. Further, if police did not meet their guardian expectations, young adults had more negative perceptions of police legitimacy. Expectations for police behavior may influence police legitimation and, within the context of police reform, young adults support the call for police to be more guardian-oriented by prioritizing community safety and building relationships. Fostering a guardian orientation in police is particularly important for police departments that are interested in promoting perceptions of legitimacy among the communities they serve.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES .....	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Warrior/Guardian Orientation to Policing .....	2
The Group Engagement Model.....	5
The Expectancy Disconfirmation Hypothesis .....	6
The Current Study .....	7
2 METHOD .....	10
Participants.....	10
Measures .....	10
Procedure .....	16
Analytic Plan.....	16
3 RESULTS .....	19
Expectation Hypothesis .....	19
Guardian Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis .....	19
Warrior Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis.....	19
Expectation-Reality Discrepancy Hypothesis .....	20
4 DISCUSSION .....	23
Policy Implications .....	27
Limitations and Future Directions .....	28

CHAPTER	Page
Conclusion .....	29
REFERENCES .....	31

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Descriptive Statistics by Race/Ethnicity .....	15
2. Correlations .....	17
3. Police Legitimacy on Expectation-Reality Discrepancy Regression Model.....	21

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Means for Warrior/Guardian Orientation and Perceived Reality .....	19
2. Police Legitimacy Based on Expectation-Reality Discrepancy .....	22

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of numerous recent high-profile acts of police brutality in the United States, there have been resounding calls for police reformation. Specifically, community members tend to support reforms that aim to improve the relationship between police and the community (Crabtree, 2020). To progress towards this reform goal, policymakers and researchers have suggested that officers shift from being warrior-oriented police who prioritize fighting crime to guardian-oriented police who prioritize keeping the community safe (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015; McLean et al., 2020; Rahr & Rice, 2016; Stoughton, 2016). By shifting to be more guardian-oriented, policing institutions could help foster perceptions of legitimacy among community members they serve (Stoughton, 2016). With this goal in mind, the current study aimed to examine how the discrepancy between young adults’ views of what police are – versus what they should be – might be related to their legitimation of policing. Specifically, this study focuses on young adults because they are the upcoming generation of voters who have the potential to influence future social policy.

The current study utilized the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) and the expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Boulding et al., 1993). Briefly, the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) explains how unjust police behavior negatively influences police legitimacy perceptions. When police treat the public fairly, the community is more likely to legitimize police, which in turn enhances their felt obligation to obey and cooperate with police (Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). While the group engagement model provides a well-supported understanding of

how police behavior shapes these critical perceptions of the legitimacy of the policing institution, it provides an incomplete understanding of how people perceive police within the current social context of police reform. Here, the expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Boulding et al., 1993) is helpful. According to this perspective, people's prior expectations influence how they experience and interpret an event and the authority figures involved. When combined with the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003), this hypothesis may explain how community members who desire police reform have heightened expectations for the policing institution becoming less willing to legitimize police who do not align with their expectations.

Utilizing the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) and expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Boulding et al., 1993), the current study examined whether young adults want police to be warrior or guardian-oriented and how the congruity or discordance between the expectations and reality may shape their perceptions of police legitimacy. In the following sections, I summarize the reformation effort to shift police from warrior-oriented to guardian-oriented and explain how the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) and expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Boulding et al., 1993; Oliver, 1980) provide insight into how young adults might use their desire for police reform to create a baseline for their police legitimacy perceptions.

### **Warrior/Guardian Orientation to Policing**

“Warrior” and “Guardian” are role orientations that police may hold in their career (McLean et al., 2020; Stoughton, 2016). These role orientations are grounded in the way police view their job and their relationship with the community (Stoughton, 2016). As such, police with warrior and guardian orientations prioritize different things.



For instance, warrior-oriented police prioritize fighting crime and police officer safety (McLean et al., 2020). Traditionally, police have had a warrior self-image that was cultivated through their police training, equipment that they use (i.e., military weapons), and rhetoric (i.e., marketing in police publications; Stoughton, 2016). Alternatively, guardian-oriented police should prioritize connecting with the community, keeping the public safe, and de-escalation (Stoughton, 2016). Guardian-oriented police tend to value nurturing their relationship with the community (McLean et al., 2020). While warrior- and guardian-oriented police are defined through their different priorities, these orientations towards policing are not mutually exclusive. In other words, “warrior” and “guardian” are not two ends of a spectrum. Rather, they are two different ideals that tend to be present simultaneously in police officers, but to varying extents (McLean et al., 2020).

Due to instances of police injustice in the United States, policymakers and researchers have suggested that police shift their orientation to view themselves as more guardian than warrior-oriented (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019; President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015; Stoughton, 2016). The re-imagining of role orientation is reflective of a change in priorities, which is anticipated to impact the community by: (1) decreasing instances of police brutality; and (2) increasing the public’s perceptions of whether the police are a legitimate authority (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019; Stoughton, 2016).

To examine the first goal of this re-imagining, McLean and colleagues (2020) studied active-duty police officers’ personal orientations, as well as their perceptions of use of force, control, and communication with community members. The researchers

found that police officers who were more warrior-oriented reported that they were more supportive of using force against community members when they shouldn't and prioritized controlling community members. Additionally, police with higher guardian orientations were less supportive of force misconduct and prioritized communication with the community (McLean et al., 2020). Preliminary, these findings support that the shift from warrior-oriented to guardian-oriented police may decrease instances of police brutality through decreasing priorities that align with force misconduct and increasing priorities that align with communication and building relationships with community members.

The second goal of shifting police from warrior-oriented to guardian-oriented – increasing police legitimacy perceptions among the public (Stoughton, 2016) – has not yet been examined empirically. Legitimacy is the perception that police have a right to the authority they have and can use that authority to dictate behavior (Fagan & Tyler, 2017; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Although the specific components of legitimacy are somewhat contentious (see Trinkner, 2019), a prevailing view is that legitimacy consists of three core components: right to power, authority to govern, and motivation (Jackson, 2018). Right to power refers to the belief that police have a right to the authority that they have. Authority to govern is the belief that police have a right to dictate rules and laws with their power. Lastly, motivation refers to the belief that community members should uphold the authority of police by abiding by the rules and laws that they dictate (Jackson, 2018).

When community members legitimize police, they are more likely to abide by the rules and laws of the community, cooperate with police, call the police to report

witnessed crimes, and feel obligated to obey the law because it is the “right” thing to do (Cohn et al., 2010; Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). With these outcomes in mind, legitimacy is an important way in which police maintain a law-abiding society with community members who obey the law out of mutual consent rather than fear. Therefore, it is important that police reform does, in fact, increase legitimacy perceptions among community members. However, we do not yet know: a) how community members actually view the call for more guardian than warrior-oriented police, and b) how their expectations of police influence their perceptions of legitimacy. The group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) and expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Boulding et al., 1993) may help explain how a desire for this re-imagining of police and perceptions of current police influence police legitimacy perceptions.

### **The Group Engagement Model**

The group engagement model is a dominant theory in policing research that aims to explain how police legitimacy perceptions are shaped by perceptions of police behavior (Tyler & Blader, 2003). The model is grounded in procedural justice, which broadly focuses on how police treat the public (Tyler, 1990). Specifically, procedural justice is comprised of four components: (1) ability to participate in the legal process, (2) respectful treatment by the officer, (3) neutrality in the decision, and (4) trust in the motives of the officer (Tyler, 1990). If these factors are deemed true, police are perceived to be procedurally just. However, if these factors are not deemed true, police are perceived to be procedurally *unjust*. The group engagement model posits that if people perceive that police act consistently in ways that are procedurally just, they are more likely to feel valued by police (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Feeling valued by police often

leads people to identify with the community that police represent, thus internalizing the rules and laws of the community and legitimizing the policing institution. In short, the group engagement model theorizes that the way in which police behave influences the extent to which community members legitimize the policing institution (Tyler & Blader, 2003).

While the evidence generally supports the group engagement model, the model focuses narrowly on how perceptions of police behavior influence perceptions of police legitimacy without fully considering how community members *want* police to act. Through the lens of police reform, expectations about how police should act may provide a baseline for how police behavior informs perceptions of legitimacy. The way in which expectations help develop legitimacy perceptions may be explained through the process of expectancy disconfirmation.

### **The Expectancy Disconfirmation Hypothesis**

The expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Oliver, 1980) may contribute to the understanding of how the desire for reform shapes perceptions of police behavior and thus perceptions of police legitimacy within the group engagement model. The expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis has traditionally been utilized to predict consumer satisfaction, asserting that all consumers enter a situation with expectations about what will happen (Boulding et al., 1993). These expectations are based on either prior knowledge of what may happen or normative expectations of what a consumer thinks should happen. Then, consumers perceive what actually occurred and compare what actually occurred to what they expected to occur. Finally, consumers make a judgement about how closely the reality of the situation aligned with their expectations, influencing

their satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). In this stage, reality may exceed expectations, match expectations, or fail to meet expectations. The extent to which reality matches expectations determines whether disconfirmation occurs, and dictates the type of disconfirmation that may occur (Boulding et al., 1993; Oliver, 1980). If reality exceeds expectations, disconfirmation occurs, but consumers are likely to be satisfied. However, if reality fails to meet expectations, disconfirmation also occurs, but consumers are likely to be dissatisfied.

While this theory has traditionally been applied to consumer satisfaction, policing scholars have utilized this theory to examine satisfaction with specific police encounters as well. For instance, Reisig and Chandek (2001) recruited community members in the U.S. who had recent contact with police. The researchers examined the difference between participants' expectations of how a police officer would act and how police actually behaved in the specific situation, finding that when reality did not meet expectations, community members were less satisfied with their interaction with the police officer (Reisig & Chandek, 2001). Other researchers have found corroborative findings; community members who expect police to act unjustly are more satisfied when police act justly in cases that involve people with mental illness (Watson et al., 2008) and domestic violence victims (Wilson & Jasinski, 2004).

The same expectancy disconfirmation process that predicts satisfaction with police may also contribute to perceptions of the legitimacy of police, especially within the current social context of police reform. The process of expectancy disconfirmation may be an avenue in which young adults who desire police reform have heightened

normative expectations for the policing institution thus becoming less willing to legitimize police who do not align with these expectations.

### **The Current Study**

Fifty-eight percent of Americans agree that the policing institution needs major reform (Crabtree, 2020). Although police reform may take many shapes, most Americans support reform that calls for police officers to develop better relationships with the community (Crabtree, 2020). Policymakers and researchers have indicated that a way in which police can develop better relationships with the community is for police to be more guardian-oriented than warrior-oriented (President’s Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing, 2015), which is anticipated to increase perceptions of legitimacy among the public (Stoughton, 2016). At a broad level, this study examined how young adults’ desires for police to be warrior-oriented and guardian-oriented, as well as perceptions of whether police in the community are perceived to be warrior-oriented and guardian-oriented, were associated with their perceptions of police legitimacy. More specifically, three research questions were asked.

**(RQ1) Expectation Hypothesis.** Do young adults think that police should have more of a “warrior” or “guardian” orientation towards policing? Young adults tend to support police reform efforts (Crabtree, 2020). Therefore, I hypothesized that young adults would want police in their community to be more guardian-orientated than warrior-oriented.

**(RQ2a) Guardian Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis.** Do young adults believe that police in their community have as much of a guardian orientation as they should? Due to the prevalence of police brutality in the United States, pleas for police reform and

strong desire for police to build better relationships with the community (Crabtree, 2020), I hypothesized that young adults would believe that police in their community do not have as much of a guardian orientation as they should be.

**(RQ2b) Warrior Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis.** Do young adults believe that police in their community have as much of a warrior orientation as they should? I hypothesized that young adults would believe police in their community have more of a warrior orientation than they should.

**(RQ3) Expectation-Reality Discrepancy Hypothesis.** Is a higher discrepancy between what young adults think police should be versus what they are in their community associated with their perceptions of legitimacy? Based on the expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Boulding et al., 1993; Oliver, 1980), I hypothesized that if police are perceived to have more of a warrior or guardian orientation than they should (reality exceeds expectations), young adults will have more positive perceptions of the legitimacy of the policing institution. However, if police are perceived to not have as much of a warrior or guardian orientation as they should (reality does not meet expectations), young adults will have more negative perceptions of the legitimacy of the policing institution.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

#### **Participants**

Young adult participants were recruited through Prolific, which is an online convenience sampling platform that recruits from a pool of users based on criteria set by the researcher (Barrowcliffe, et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2020). Young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 were eligible to participate in the survey if they resided in the United States and spoke fluent English. Because non-White community members tend to have more negative experiences with police (Desilver et al., 2020), I set quotas for race and ethnicity to ensure that non-White participants were sampled appropriately to understand the perceptions of people who may have more negative experiences with police. As such, I aimed to recruit approximately: 150 White, non-Hispanic/Latine young adults; 150 Black/African American, non-Hispanic/Latine young adults; and 150 Hispanic/Latine young adults. My total initial sample consisted of 473 participants. I removed 30 participants who failed at least one of the two attention checks (i.e., “Please select ‘strongly agree’”) and seven who had missing data on at least one of the key variables. The final sample size was  $N = 436$ . The demographics for this final sample are indicated in Table 1, where all key variables are delineated by race and ethnicity. Participants were compensated \$2 for their participation, based on a \$10/hour rate.

#### **Measures**

##### ***Dependent Variable***

**Police Legitimacy.** Participants were presented with five items about their perceptions of the legitimacy of police and rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale of



*strongly disagree to strongly agree*. Two of these items assessed the normative alignment aspect of police legitimacy, which is the extent to which a participant believes that police have the same sense of right and wrong as they do (Jackson et al., 2012; “The police in my community stand up for values that are important for people like me,” and “The police in my community usually act in ways that are consistent with my own ideas about what is right and wrong.”). The other three items assessed traditional police legitimacy concepts (Tyler, 1990; “I have a great deal of respect for the police,” “Overall, the police in my community are honest,” and “I feel proud of the police in my community”). The items were mean-scored to create an overall legitimacy item, with higher scores indicating more positive perceptions of the legitimacy of police,  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $\alpha = .96$ .

### ***Predictor Variables***

**Warrior/Guardian Orientation Perceptions.** To examine both warrior/guardian orientation expectations and warrior/guardian orientation reality, I utilized a modified version of McLean and colleagues’ (2020) Warrior/Guardian Orientation measure. The original measure assessed active-duty police officers’ warrior and guardian orientation towards policing by asking about different priorities that align with each orientation. This measure contains a total of nine items; six items assess guardian orientation, and three items assess warrior orientation. I modified these nine items to examine guardian expectation, warrior expectation, guardian reality, and warrior reality, which are detailed below.

***Guardian Expectations.*** To examine guardian expectations, I modified the guardian orientation factor of the Warrior/Guardian Orientation measure (McLean et al.,

2020) to specifically assess if participants believed that police *should* have an orientation that aligns with guardians. I presented the participants with six statements: (1) “It is important for police officers to have non-enforcement contact with the public,” (2) “Law enforcement and community members must work together to solve local problems,” (3) “A primary responsibility of police should be to build trust between the department and the community,” (4) “Police should have a primary responsibility to protect the constitutional rights of residents,” (5) “Police are civil servants,” and (6) “Police should routinely collaborate with community members in their daily duties.” Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale of *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The items were mean-scored to create an overall guardian expectation item. Higher scores indicated more desire for police to have a guardian orientation,  $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ .

**Warrior Expectations.** To examine warrior expectations, I modified the warrior orientation factor of the Warrior/Guardian Orientation measure (McLean et al., 2020) to specifically assess if participants believed that police *should* have an orientation that aligns with warriors. I presented participants with three items: (1) “Enforcing the law should be a patrol officer’s most important responsibility,” (2) “A police officer’s primary role should be to control predatory suspects that threaten members of the community,” (3) “A police officer’s primary responsibility should be to fight crime.” These items were mean-scored to create an overall warrior expectations item, with higher scores indicating more desire for police to have a warrior orientation,  $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ,  $\alpha = .77$

***Guardian Reality.*** To examine guardian reality, I modified the guardian orientation factor of the Warrior/Guardian Orientation measure (McLean et al., 2020) to assess if participants believe that police in their community be guardian-oriented. I presented the participants with six statements: (1) “Police in my community believe it is important for police officers to have non-enforcement contact with the public,” (2) “Police in my community believe it is important to work with community members to solve local problems,” (3) “Police in my community believe their primary responsibility should be to build trust between the department and the community,” (4) “Police in my community believe their primary responsibility should be to protect the constitutional rights of residents,” (5) “Police in my community are civil servants,” and (6) “Police in my community believe that they should routinely collaborate with community members in their daily duties.” Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale of *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The items were mean-scored to create an overall guardian reality item, with higher scores indicating that young adults believed police in their community are more guardian-oriented,  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ .

***Warrior Reality.*** To examine warrior reality, I modified the warrior orientation factor of the Warrior/Guardian Orientation measure (McLean et al., 2020) to assess if participants believed that police in their community are warrior-oriented. I presented participants with three items: (1) “Police in my community believe that enforcing the law should be their most important responsibility,” (2) “Police in my community believe that their primary role should be to control predatory suspects that threaten members of the public,” (3) “Police in my community believe that their primary responsibility is to fight crime.” These items were mean-scored to create an overall warrior reality item, with

higher scores indicating that young adults believed police in their community are more warrior-oriented,  $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ .

**Expectation-Reality Discrepancy.** In order to assess the discrepancy between expectations and perceived reality for both guardian orientation and warrior orientation, two variables were created: Guardian Expectation-Reality Discrepancy and Warrior Expectation-Reality Discrepancy. For both of these variables, more positive values indicated that perceived reality did not meet expectations. A zero for this variable indicated that perceived reality met expectations. More negative values indicated that perceived reality exceeded expectations.

To calculate guardian expectation-reality discrepancy, the scores for guardian reality were subtracted from guardian expectation (i.e., expectation – reality). Scores for guardian expectation-reality discrepancy ranged from -1.83 to 4.00,  $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ . Higher values indicated the participants' expectations for guardian orientation surpassed reality. In other words, a value greater than zero indicated that the participant believed police are not as guardian as they should be.

To calculate warrior expectation-reality discrepancy, the scores for warrior reality were subtracted from warrior expectation (i.e., expectation - reality). Scores for warrior expectation-reality discrepancy ranged from -4.00 to 4.00,  $M = -0.09$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ . Higher values indicated expectations for warrior orientation surpassed reality. In other words, a value greater than zero indicated that the participant believed police are not as warrior as they should be.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics by Race/Ethnicity*

Dependent Variable	White, non Hispanic/Latine				Black or African American				Hispanic or Latine				Total Sample			
	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max
Police Legitimacy	2.89	1.22	1.00	5.00	2.57	1.09	1.00	5.00	2.81	1.01	1.00	5.00	2.76	1.12	1.00	5.00
Predictor Variables																
Guardian Expectations	4.25	0.59	2.17	5.00	4.20	0.68	1.33	5.00	4.31	0.56	2.67	5.00	4.25	0.62	1.33	5.00
Warrior Expectations	3.58	0.85	1.00	5.00	3.62	0.96	1.00	5.00	3.62	0.95	1.00	5.00	3.61	0.92	1.00	5.00
Guardian Reality	3.06	0.87	1.00	5.00	2.94	0.90	1.00	5.00	3.03	0.87	1.00	5.00	3.01	0.88	1.00	5.00
Warrior Reality	3.78	0.73	1.67	5.00	3.58	0.88	1.00	5.00	3.73	0.89	1.00	5.00	3.70	0.84	1.00	5.00
Guardian Expectation-Reality	1.18	1.00	-0.50	4.00	1.26	1.03	-1.83	4.00	1.28	0.95	-0.50	4.00	1.24	0.99	-1.83	4.00
Warrior Expectation-Reality	-0.19	1.07	-4.00	3.00	0.04	1.24	-4.00	4.00	-0.11	1.12	-4.00	4.00	-0.09	1.15	-4.00	4.00
Demographic Covariates																
Age	19.62	1.10	18.00	23.00	21.55	1.77	18.00	25.00	21.21	1.75	18.00	24.00	20.77	1.78	18.00	25.00
Male	0.38	-	0.00	1.00	0.37	-	0.00	1.00	0.45	-	0.00	1.00	0.40	-	0.00	1.00
Female	0.57	-	0.00	1.00	0.61	-	0.00	1.00	0.50	-	0.00	1.00	0.56	-	0.00	1.00
Not-Listed Gender	0.05	-	0.00	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
N	151				145				140				436			

*Note.* *M* refers to mean. *SD* refers to standard deviation. *Min* refers to minimum. *Max* refers to maximum.

## **Procedure**

Young adults were recruited through Prolific. The survey appeared on eligible users' dashboards, allowing them to opt into the survey if they chose to. If the user chose to take the survey, they were redirected to a Qualtrics link in which they consented to their participation. After providing consent, participants self-reported their police legitimacy perceptions, whether they think that police should have warrior and guardian orientations (i.e., warrior/guardian expectations), whether they believe that police in their community have warriors and guardians orientations (i.e., warrior/guardian reality), and their demographics. Participants took about 12 minutes to complete the survey. Once participants completed the survey, they were thanked for their participation and were compensated through Prolific within three days of completion.

## **Analytic Plan**

Preliminarily, I conducted Pearson correlations to determine the relationship between the key variables in the current study (Table 2). Because the key variables in the study were related to one another in the anticipated directions that would support my hypotheses, I proceeded with hypothesis testing. In order to examine the Expectation Hypothesis that young adults will prefer police to have more of a guardian than warrior orientation, I conducted a paired samples t-test comparing the means for guardian expectations and warrior expectations. To examine the Guardian Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis that young adults will want police to have a guardian orientation more so than they perceive police in their community to currently have, I conducted a paired samples t-test comparing the means for guardian expectations and guardian reality. In order to examine the Warrior Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis that young adults will want

police to have less of a warrior orientation than they perceive police in their community to actually have, I conducted a paired samples t-test comparing the means for warrior expectations and warrior reality.

Table 2

*Correlations*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Legitimacy	-						
2. Guardian Expectations	.10*	-					
3. Warrior Expectations	.48***	.28***	-				
4. Guardian Reality	.68***	.15**	.39***	-			
5. Warrior Reality	.27***	.14**	.15**	.34***	-		
6. Guardian Expectation-Reality Discrepancy	-.54***	.49***	-.17**	-.79***	-.21***	-	
7. Warrior Expectation-Reality Discrepancy	.19***	.12*	.69***	.06	-.61***	.02	-
8. Age	-.03	.08	.08	.01	-.04	.04	.10*

*Note.* Pearson's correlation was used for all correlations. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Lastly, to examine the Expectation-Reality Discrepancy Hypothesis that the extent to which police are not as warrior/guardian as young adults want them to be (i.e., a more positive expectation-reality discrepancy), the more negative their legitimacy perceptions will be, I conducted an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with police legitimacy perceptions as the dependent variable, guardian expectation-reality discrepancy and warrior expectation-reality discrepancy as the predictor variables, and

age, race/ethnicity, and gender as the covariates. Due to the small sample size of participants who identified with an unlisted gender, all models were conducted with and without these participants. Because the results for all the models were the same if these participants were included or not included, participants who identified with an unlisted gender were kept in the models.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

#### **Expectation Hypothesis**

To assess the first hypothesis that young adults will believe that police should be more warrior- than guardian-oriented, I conducted a paired samples *t*-test. As shown in Figure 1, the mean of guardian expectation ( $M = 4.25$ ) was significantly higher than the mean of warrior expectation ( $M = 3.61$ ), demonstrating that young adults thought that police should be more guardian- than warrior-oriented,  $t(435) = -14.19$ ,  $MD = -.65$ , 95%  $CI (-0.74, -0.56)$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.68$ .

#### **Guardian Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis**

To assess the second hypothesis that young adults will want police to have more of a guardian orientation than they perceive police in their community to actually have, I conducted a paired samples *t*-test. As shown in Figure 1, the mean for guardian expectation ( $M = 4.25$ ) was significantly higher than participants' ratings of the perceived guardian orientation of police in their community (i.e., guardian reality;  $M = 3.01$ ), which means that participants did not think that police in their community are as guardian as they should be,  $t(435) = 26.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $MD = 1.24$ , 95%  $CI (1.15, 1.33)$ ,  $d = 1.25$ .

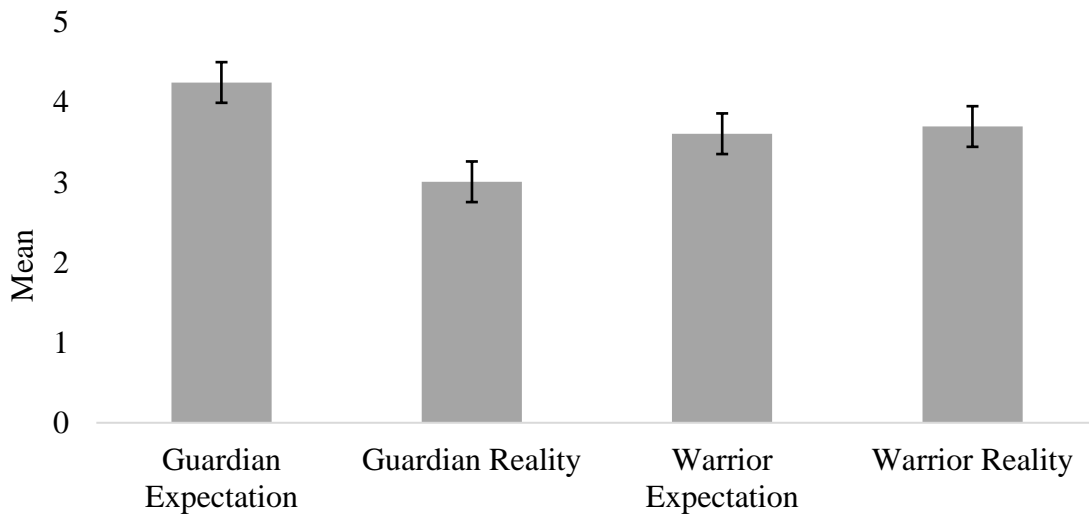
#### **Warrior Expectation vs. Reality Hypothesis**

To assess the hypothesis that young adults would want police to have less of a warrior orientation than they perceive police in their community actually have, I conducted a paired samples *t*-test. As shown in Figure 1, the mean for warrior orientation ( $M = 3.61$ ) was not significantly different than participants' ratings of the warrior orientation of police in their community ( $M = 3.70$ ), which means that, overall,

participants thought that police in their community are as warrior as they should be,  $t(435) = -1.60$ ,  $MD = -.09$ ,  $95\% CI (-0.20, 0.02)$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $d = -0.08$ .

Figure 1

*Means for Warrior/Guardian Expectations and Perceived Reality*



### **Expectation-Reality Discrepancy Hypothesis**

To assess the third hypothesis that a higher expectation-reality discrepancy will be associated with lower perceptions of the legitimacy of police, I conducted an OLS regression with legitimacy as the dependent variable and both guardian expectation-reality discrepancy and warrior expectation-reality discrepancy as the independent variables. Age, race/ethnicity, and gender were utilized as covariates in the model. Note that more positive numbers for both guardian and warrior expectation-reality discrepancy indicate that expectations of what police should be were not met by perceptions of reality (i.e., expectations > reality). A zero for these variables indicates that police are perceived to have met expectations (i.e., expectations = reality). Negative numbers indicate that

expectations of what police should be were exceeded, and police were perceived to be more warrior or guardian than desired (i.e., expectations < reality).

Table 3

*Police Legitimacy on Expectation-Reality Discrepancy Regression Models*

Path	<i>b</i>	SE	95% CI		p-value
			Lower	Upper	
Guardian Expectation-Reality Discrepancy	-0.57	.04	-0.66	-0.48	<.001
Warrior Expectation-Reality Discrepancy	0.20	.04	0.12	0.27	<.001
Demographic Covariates					
Age	0.01	.03	-0.04	0.06	.72
Race and Ethnicity					
Black/African American <sup>a</sup>	-0.35	.12	-0.58	-0.12	.003
Hispanic/Latine <sup>a</sup>	-0.08	.11	-0.30	0.15	.50
Gender					
Male <sup>b</sup>	0.26	.09	0.08	0.43	.004
Not-Listed Gender <sup>b</sup>	-0.59	.23	-1.03	-0.14	.010
Constant	3.25	.55	2.18	4.33	<.001

*Note.* Coefficient *b* is unstandardized. <sup>a</sup> Race/ethnicity is compared to White, non-Hispanic/Latine. <sup>b</sup> Gender is compared to female

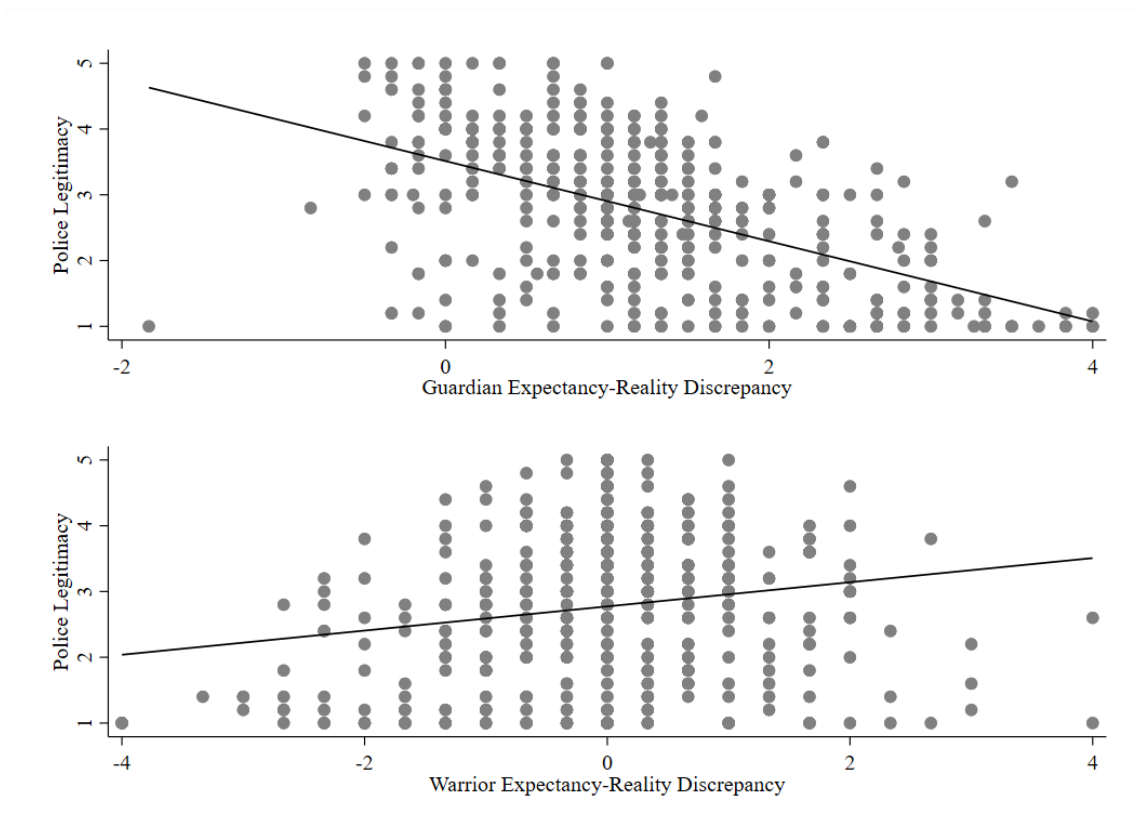
Beginning with the results for the discrepancy between guardian expectation-reality in Table 3, for each unit more positive the discrepancy between whether young adults believed police should have a guardian orientation and what they perceived police to be in their community, legitimacy perceptions were .59 units lower. As shown in Figure 2, the more that young adults believed that police are not as guardian as they should be, the less they endorsed the legitimacy of police in their community. In other

words, the more that young adults believed that their guardian expectations were not met by police in their community, the less they legitimized police in their community.

Turning to the results for the discrepancy between warrior expectation-reality in Table 3, for each unit higher the discrepancy between whether young adults believed police should be warriors and what they perceived police to be in their community, legitimacy perceptions were .20 units higher. As shown in Figure 2, compared to young adults who thought that police were less warrior than they believe police should be, young adults who believed that police were more warrior than they should be reported worse perceptions of police legitimacy.

Figure 2

*Police Legitimacy Based on Expectation-Reality Discrepancy*



## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

In the wake of police repeatedly using excessive force on community members, particularly community members of color, there have been calls for more guardian orientations in police (McLean et al., 2020; Stoughton et al., 2015; Stoughton, 2016). However, there is little understanding of what orientations community members, especially young adult community members, want police to have. According to the Warrior/Guardian framework, warrior-oriented and guardian-oriented police hold different priorities within their career (McLean et al., 2020). While warrior-oriented police prioritize fighting crime and physical control, guardian-oriented police prioritize keeping the community safe and building relationships with community members. The shift from warrior- to guardian-oriented police is theorized to increase perceptions of police legitimacy among the public (Stoughton, 2016). This study specifically assessed young adults' perceptions, because young adults are the upcoming generation of voters in the U.S. who will influence social policy in the future.

The present study assessed three research questions. First, I examined the extent to which young adults' desire for police to be warrior-oriented or guardian-oriented aligns with recommendations from researchers and policymakers. Similar to what McLean and colleagues (2020) found when examining warrior and guardian orientations in active-duty police officers, I found that young adults support police holding both warrior and guardian orientations. These findings indicate that warrior and guardian orientations are not mutually exclusive. Both orientations are present in police officers (McLean et al., 2020) and desired by young adults in the community. More specifically,

however, I found that while young adults wanted police in their community to hold orientations that align with both warriors and guardians, they preferred police to be more guardian-oriented than warrior-oriented. These findings reinforce the call for more guardian-oriented police (Stoughton, 2016), suggesting that researchers and policymakers are advocating for reform that fortunately aligns with the reform desires of young adults in the United States.

Second, I assessed if young adults believed that police in their community were as warrior-oriented and guardian-oriented as they should be. Specifically, I examined if young adults believed police in their community held orientations that aligned with guardians as much as they want them to, and if they believed police in their community held orientations that aligned with warriors as much as they want them to. I found that young adults in this sample believed that police in their community are not as guardian-oriented as they want them to be. However, young adults believed police in their community were as warrior-oriented as they wanted them to be. Taken together, these findings indicate police in participants' communities have not yet reformed to the same extent young adults want them to. These data were collected in the winter of 2022, just over a year after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police, which was an event that sparked nationwide outcry for police reform (Buchanan et al., 2020) stemming from the culmination of police brutality in the United States (Cordner, 2020). Considering that guardian-oriented police prioritize keeping the community safe and building relationships with community members, within the context of such horrific police brutality in the United States, it is unsurprising that young adults in this sample did not view police in their community to hold the same guardian orientation as they wanted them to. It is

surprising, however, that young adults did not want police in their community to have less of a warrior orientation, which focuses more on physical control and fighting crime. This finding may stem from the overall goal of police in the United States, which is traditionally to fight crime (Stoughton, 2016). While reform efforts urge police to hold stronger guardian than warrior orientations, community members may still view fighting crime as an important objective of policing. That is, it does not seem that the young adults in this sample believed police should diminish their warrior orientations at the expense of holding guardian orientations.

The question then becomes, how does the discrepancy between desire for police reform and perceived lack of reform among community police influence legitimacy perceptions? To address this third research question, I turn to the group engagement model and the expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis. The group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) suggests that if police behave in a consistently procedurally just manner, community members are more likely to view police as a legitimate authority. Simultaneously, the expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Oliver, 1980) is useful, as it describes how expectations for behavior shape perceptions of actual behavior. If reality fails to meet expectations, people are likely to be dissatisfied, but if reality exceeds expectations, people are likely to be satisfied (Boulding et al., 1993; Oliver, 1980). Within the context of current police reform in the United States, it is possible that people also utilize their desire for how they want police to behave to shape their perceptions of the legitimacy of police.

Integrating both the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) and expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Boulding et al., 1993; Oliver, 1980) enabled me

to assess how the expectation-reality discrepancy was associated with young adults' perceptions of police legitimacy. Beginning with the results for guardian orientation, when young adults believed police did not meet guardian orientation expectations, they had more negative perceptions of the legitimacy of police in their community. However, if police in the community were perceived to have more of a guardian orientation than desired, young adults reported more positive legitimacy perceptions because police exceeded their expectations. As suggested by the expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Oliver, 1980), normative expectations of police behavior, such as wanting police to be more guardian-oriented, provided a baseline for the process in which police behavior informed legitimacy perceptions. These findings support the call for more guardian- than warrior-oriented police by providing empirical support for the notion that as police become more guardian-oriented, legitimacy perceptions among the public will likely improve.

Turning to the findings for participants' perceptions of the warrior orientation, the opposite relationship was uncovered. When young adults believed police did not meet warrior orientation expectations, they had more positive perceptions of the legitimacy of police in their community. Alternatively, if young adults perceived community police to have more of a warrior orientation than desired, they reported worse legitimacy perceptions. The expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis suggests that satisfaction is more likely when reality exceeds expectations (Oliver, 1980). Contrary to this hypothesis, young adults were most likely to legitimize police in their community when they were perceived to be *less* warrior-oriented than expected (i.e., perceived reality did *not* meet expectations). While these findings do not align with the expectancy disconfirmation



hypothesis, they certainly make sense within the current police reform context in the United States and the group engagement model. Police reform advocates call for more guardian than warrior-oriented police (Stoughton, 2016). This call for less warrior-oriented police may be so ingrained in young adults that police were legitimized the most when they did not meet warrior orientation expectations.

### **Policy Implications**

Altogether, these findings have important implications for police. Police departments that are interested in fostering legitimacy perceptions among the communities they serve should consider community members' expectations when implementing training programs and engaging in reform efforts. Importantly, my findings suggest police departments should consider heeding the calls to foster guardian orientations among police officers. The increase in guardian orientations may be developed from training or recruitment (see Rahr & Rice, 2015; Stoughton, 2016). As the Police Executive Research Forum (2022) has suggested, training police recruits is an opportunity to “fundamentally reshape the culture of policing” (p. 9). To reshape this culture, the Police Executive Research Forum (2022) recommends 40 guiding principles to better train officers to become problem solvers rather than crime-fighting soldiers, such as through communication skills, de-escalation, and crisis intervention.

Beyond just training police to be more guardian-oriented, however, it is crucial that police behave in ways that convey their guardian orientation to the communities they serve. This current study focused on how young adults *perceive* police in their community to be oriented. Therefore, it is unlikely that simply training police to reorient themselves is enough to foster legitimacy among young adults. In addition to helping

police re-orient the way in which they view their career, police must act in ways that align with these critical guardian orientations to ensure that the public is aware of the reorientation and thus perceives police to hold orientations that align with their guardian orientation expectations.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study provides groundwork for better understanding young adults' perceptions of police, it is not without limitations. First, this study was cross-sectional, which means that causal effects cannot be determined. By utilizing the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) and expectancy disconfirmation hypothesis (Oliver, 1980), directionality can be inferred, but cannot be determined with certainty. The significant relationship found in this study between expectation-reality discrepancy and perceptions of the legitimacy of the policing institution suggests that future research should assess reform expectations and perceptions of reality longitudinally or with experimental designs to more concretely understand how these concepts are related causally.

Regarding measurement, this study assessed participants' perceptions of reality rather than actual reality. Despite this limitation, the ways police are reforming may not matter if community members do not perceive such reforms. For instance, a Pew Research study reported that while 31% of police view themselves as "protectors," only 16% of community members see their local police as "protectors" (Morin et al., 2017). As such, future studies should examine the difference between perceived police orientations and actual orientations to determine how this measurement nuance differs in these models. Additionally, community members tend to differ on their perceptions of police reform based on political ideology (Crabtree, 2020), suggesting that political

differences would be a critical individual characteristic to consider in future research assessing such research questions.

Lastly, this study narrowly focused on young adults, which is a unique population that cannot be generalized to the United States population. Despite the inability to generalize the findings to the population, this sample had several strengths such as the racial and ethnic diversity and its focus on the upcoming generation of voters who will influence future social policy and who may become the future faces of police departments.

## **Conclusion**

In response to unjust police behavior in the U.S., researchers and policymakers have urged police to reimagine their roles as guardians of the community rather than solely serving the community as warriors (Rahr & Rice, 2015; Stoughton, 2016). While warrior-oriented police prioritize fighting crime and physical control, guardian-oriented police prioritize keeping people safe and building relationships with the community (McLean et al., 2020). Developing guardian orientations among police has been theorized to increase perceptions that police are a legitimate authority among community members (Stoughton, 2016).

This study examined how young adults, the future generation in the U.S., perceive this reform, police in their community, and the legitimacy of the policing institution. Young adults in this sample wanted police to have more of a guardian than warrior orientation, and their perceptions of the legitimacy of police were worse when they thought that police in their community were not as guardian-oriented as they thought they should be. These findings align with the reform efforts that call for more guardian than

warrior-oriented police. Moreover, they provide empirical support for the theory that police departments might improve their legitimacy through developing their officers' guardian orientations. This study also demonstrates that normative expectations, such as wanting police to hold guardian orientations, may provide a baseline for perceptions of police legitimacy. Police are most effective at keeping the community safe if community members legitimize them. Therefore, police departments who are interested in fostering legitimacy perceptions should consider focusing on training and recruitment that promote officers' guardian orientations and teach police to act in ways that convey their guardian orientation to the communities they serve.

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