The Importance of Outcome Fairness: Revisiting the Role of Distributive Justice

Kyle McLean

Distributive justice, or the perceived fairness of outcomes, has played a minimal role in research into procedural justice and legitimacy in policing. However, allegations of racial bias that have contributed to the present legitimacy crisis in policing are more consistent with the concept of distributive justice than procedural justice. As such, the present study attempts to re-orient distributive justice within policing research. This study proposes that individuals infer the fairness of outcomes from the treatment that they receive from police officers. These judgments about outcome and treatment then combine to influence individuals’ perceptions of the legitimacy of police. In addition to testing this theoretical framework, the present study proposes a new concept, justice-restoring responses, from the field of social psychology. Justice-restoring responses are actions individuals take after experiencing injustice to rectify the injustice they experienced. In the case of policing, these actions may take the form of complaints filed against police officers regarding the interaction. Procedural justice, distributive justice, and outcome favorability are proposed as potential predictors of justice-restoring responses. To test these proposals randomized vignettes with varying conditions of procedural justice and outcome favorability will be assigned to a national convenience sample. Structural equation modeling is then used to assess the relationships between the concepts of interest.