

Article

Religious Identity and Perceptions of Criminal Justice Effectiveness

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Abstract: Religiosity and attitudes regarding the criminal justice system have remained largely unstudied to date, despite the centrality of religion as an aspect of one's identity formation. This study tests the hypothesis that perceptions of the effectiveness of police and the courts vary according to religious identity (affiliation, membership, and self-described religiosity or spirituality). A self-administered questionnaire was completed by 342 undergraduate students in introductory social science courses at a mid-sized university in the Southeastern US. Multiple Ordinary Least Squares regression analyses were performed on predictors of two outcome variables: perceived police effectiveness and perceived court effectiveness. Results offer partial support for a religious identity-based explanation of public perceptions of criminal justice system effectiveness. Membership of a local congregation, in general, was associated with higher ratings of police and court effectiveness. In addition, African Americans rated criminal justice effectiveness lower than non-African Americans. Once interactions between race and religious identity were incorporated, race itself became non-significant for both views on court and police effectiveness. However, these results showed that among African Americans, being a congregation member significantly reduced rather than increased ratings of police effectiveness. Religion thus continues to be complex and even paradoxical in shaping perceptions in the US.

Keywords: African American; courts; criminal justice system; law enforcement; religious identity

1. Introduction

The current study explores the possibility that perceptions of formal criminal justice authorities are partly shaped by factors having to do with how citizens identify and perceive themselves. Specifically, the study tests if perceptions of the effectiveness of police and the courts vary according to religious identity (affiliation, membership, and self-described religiosity or spirituality) in a sample of undergraduate college students. Two opposing hypotheses are considered. One is that religious identity is positively related to perceived criminal justice effectiveness. Criminal behavior is inconsistent with religious identity. Perhaps religious identity fosters favorable views of the agencies officially designated to condemn crime. Alternatively, one could hypothesize that religious identity is negatively related to perceived criminal justice effectiveness. The criminal justice system operates largely according to secular principles. Perhaps religious identity fosters dissatisfaction with criminal justice responses, as they may be viewed as inconsistent with religious ideologies. The study moves beyond a simple explanation that religious persons tend to be more politically conservative, and conservatives tend to be more supportive of the criminal justice system.

Few, if any, studies have examined the impact of religion upon citizen perceptions of criminal justice agencies. A small number of studies have found religious involvement to be related to

perceptions having to do with crime itself. For example, in a sample of residents in western Georgia (United States), Matthews, Johnson, and Jenks (Matthews et al. 2011) found that attendance at religious services was negatively related to fear of property crime, suggesting that religious involvement reduces fear of victimization. In addition, several studies have examined the impact of religion upon criminal behavior, usually finding that religion variables are associated with lower criminality (Adamczyk et al. 2017). Akers (2010, p. 1) believes that this may occur because religion “provides institutional support for conformity to conventional norms.”

Perhaps religious persons tend to have stronger ties to other institutions of social control, and we can expect them to have more favorable views of the agencies that officially condemn crime. Religious affiliation has been found to build general trust in others (Welch et al. 2007), which might be extended to governmental agencies. Then again dissatisfaction may emerge from perceived inconsistencies between the largely secular ways that police and courts deal with crime and what religious doctrine prescribes for the control and punishment of offending. Compared to others, religious persons may view criminal behavior with more moral indignation and have more punitive attitudes toward it. Some, however, may object to the perceived harshness of the criminal justice system, such as the use of capital punishment (e.g., emphasizing forgiveness over “eye for an eye”). Baker and Booth (2016) found that punitiveness varies among religious persons. For example, belief in transcendent evil (e.g., devil and hell) was associated with greater punitiveness, while religious practice (service attendance, prayer, and reading scripture) was associated with lower punitiveness.

At any rate, we may wonder if religious persons define themselves in contrast to actors in the criminal justice system—in other words, if criminal justice agencies serve as potential “out-groups” for members of a religion. While past research does not offer a basis for predicting that religion factors helps shape perceptions of criminal justice, social identity theory might.

2. Social Identity Theory

As first conceptualized by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, social identity is the part of one’s self-concept that is derived from memberships in meaningful social groups or categories. People draw from group memberships and social categorization to help define themselves, in relation to others. Since one’s self-image is at stake, individuals tend to have an “in-group bias”; one favors one’s own group over comparable other groups, or, “out-groups.” Turner, Brown, and Tajfel (Turner et al. 1979, p. 190) write:

It is assumed that individuals are motivated to achieve a positive self-image and that self-esteem can be enhanced by a positive evaluation of one’s own group. Own group is evaluated by comparison with others: positively discrepant comparisons between ingroup and some relevant outgroup (perceived evaluative differences favouring the ingroup) provide a positive group identity which enhances self-esteem. An individual’s social identity is those aspects of his self-concept contributed by the social groups to which he perceived himself to belong. Very generally, then, individuals are motivated to establish positively valued differences (positively discrepant comparisons) between the ingroup and a relevant outgroup to achieve a positive social identity . . . The search for positively valued distinctiveness can lead to biases in behavior, evaluations and perception.

Identities can be defined by both individual level attributes (e.g., physical and personality characteristics) and memberships in social groups or categories (e.g., religious congregation or denomination, community action group, professional society, or race or gender) (Clayton 2008). Perceived individual attributes and group memberships are used by others, observers, to identify the individual. However, the individual too draws from this information to identify oneself, although self-identification may or may not be relatively consistent with the perceptions of others. Regarding group membership, individuals often self-assign the stereotypes of the group to which they belong. Clayton (2008, p. 245) writes “Emphasizing similarities among group members (e.g., in experiences or values), following group norms, or expressing attitudes that are considered typical of the ingroup

are all means of demonstrating a strong group identity." A strong group identity corresponds with heightened loyalty to the group (solidarity). In addition, stereotyped attributes of relevant groups to which one does not belong—out-groups—are often assigned to its members and stand in contrast to the perceived attributes of the in-group. Group memberships therefore tell us "who we are" and "who we are not." Perceptions of out-groups are often unfavorable in comparison to the in-group, especially when groups are in conflict (Clayton 2008). Thus, group identities play a major role in shaping the individual's perceptions of reality.

Social identity is largely a theory of intergroup behavior, especially conflict. However, it articulates more specifically that intergroup behavior is explained by perceptions that group members have of their groups and others', as well as broader circumstances. Thus, social identity theory may be used to understand how individuals develop their perceptions regarding major social issues. Perhaps perceptions of criminal justice are shaped in part by in-group/out-group differentiation. Jang, Joo, and Zhao (Jang et al. 2010) found that acceptance toward deviant subcultures was negatively related to confidence in the police, or stated another way, less acceptance toward deviant subcultures is positively related to confidence in the police. Those who identify with, or at least have empathy toward, alternative groups may be more critical of criminal justice while those who strongly identify with the mainstream may be less critical.

Clayton (2008) explains that individuals' perceptions of justice reflect group memberships and ideologies. Salient group identities can influence the way that individuals perceive the justice of social and political events and potential responses (e.g., policy). These group identities "reflect a sense of belonging to or involvement with a group based on shared values, goals, or characteristics; they arise from ascribed characteristics such as race or gender as well as from experiences of similarity" (Clayton 2008, p. 242). Identities shared with others frames which events and actors are most self-relevant, thereby directing more attention to them, but they also suggest preferences as to how to evaluate them. Clayton (2008, p. 242) writes that "(p)eople want to maintain a positive sense of themselves as group members, so they may be predisposed to perceive outcomes that advance their groups' interests as fair, and to justify actions and values ascribed to these groups." In the current study, we speculate that to a large extent, individuals judge criminal justice in a manner that is consistent with what their social identities would seem (to them) to dictate.

As relates to religion and identity, research has traditionally held that religious institutions were powerful shapers of (relatively stable) individual identities, though this may be less true today as identity has become increasingly fluid, changing and intersectional (Loveland 2016, p. 281). Still, religious involvement and identity is considered important by sociologists of religion as a shaper of overall identity (Loveland 2016; Olson and Warber 2008). As relates specifically to crime and the criminal justice system, the general view has long held that religious involvement shapes a largely negative attitude towards criminal activity (Hoffmann et al. 2016). By extension, it seems reasonable to conclude that for those whose identity has been shaped meaningfully by religion, they would also hold more favorable views of institutions that serve a socially protective role against crime, such as police and the courts.

Few studies have explored the relationship between identity and perceptions of criminal justice, outside of the impact of demographic variables. Studies finding differences across social categories tend not to utilize an identity theory framework, and it cannot be assumed that these differences are attributable to participants' identification with these categories—gender, race, and ethnicity for example. Closed-ended demographic questions especially do not directly measure respondents' self or social identification with meaningful groups or categories. Under-explored is the influence of identification with smaller social units, such as groups and organizations, and self-designated characteristics. Perhaps these identities are more, or at least as salient as identification with broad social categories when individuals develop their perceptions of criminal justice.

However, a few studies found that explicit ethnic identity variables predict perceptions of the police. Lee, Steinberg, and Piquero (Lee et al. 2010) found in a sample of African American juvenile

offenders that those with a strong ethnic identity perceived more police discrimination but reported more favorable views of police legitimacy. This is not necessarily a contradiction, as strong ethnic identity is also associated with maturity and pro-social attitudes. Indeed, Lee, Steinberg, Piquero, and Knight (Lee et al. 2011) then found more specifically that higher ethnic identity exploration over time predicted higher perceived police legitimacy over time. In another study, Barboza (2012) found in a national sample of Mexican Americans that those with a strong sense of linked fate, a shared sense of purpose and interest, and strong ethnic identity were more likely to perceive that the police treat Mexican Americans unfairly.

3. Predictors of Perceptions of Criminal Justice

Some relatively stable predictors of perceptions of criminal justice are apparent in the literature. These include demographic variables. To begin, *race and ethnicity* are perhaps the most stable, with studies usually finding that minorities, especially African Americans and Hispanics, hold more unfavorable views of the police or courts compared to Whites (Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Cheurprakobkit 2000; Frank et al. 2005; Gabbidon and Higgins 2009; Higgins et al. 2009; Lai and Chao 2010; MacDonald and Stokes 2006; Miller and Davis 2008; O'Connor 2008; Salvatore et al. 2013; Schafer et al. 2003; Schuck et al. 2008; Sun and Wu 2006; Wenzel et al. 2003).

Sex or gender is also a major predictor, with studies usually showing that males hold more unfavorable views of the police or courts (Barboza 2012; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Kaukinen and Colavecchia 1999; Lai and Chao 2010; MacDonald and Stokes 2006; O'Connor 2008; Schafer et al. 2003; Shelley et al. 2013). However, Gabbidon and Higgins (2009) found that women were more likely to believe that Blacks are treated unfairly by the police.

Age is a major predictor of perceptions of the police, with younger people tending to have more unfavorable views (Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Dai and Johnson 2009; Gabbidon and Higgins 2009; Jang et al. 2010; Lai and Chao 2010; Miller and Davis 2008; O'Connor 2008; Shelley et al. 2013). However, aging may work differently upon one's perceptions of the courts. Jones and Weatherburn (2010) found that younger persons were more confident in court sentences and Kaukinen and Colavecchia (1999) found that older persons were more likely to rate the courts low on their ability to help crime victims.

Socioeconomic status is yet another major predictor. Studies tend to show that lower SES persons have more unfavorable views of the police or courts, except under certain circumstances. *Income* is often negatively related to favor toward the police or courts (Barboza 2012; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Frank et al. 2005; Hinds 2009), and *education* is often positively related to favor toward the police or courts (Frank et al. 2005; Jang et al. 2010; Jones and Weatherburn 2010; Miller and Davis 2008; Salvatore et al. 2013; Wenzel et al. 2003). However, Gabbidon and Higgins (2009) found that higher SES (income, employment, and education) persons were more likely to believe that Blacks are treated unfairly by the police; Schafer et al. (2003) found that education is negatively related to favor toward community policing specifically; Dowler (2002) found that college education was associated with lower ratings of police effectiveness but only among respondents with no recent police contact. Additionally, Kaukinen and Colavecchia (1999) found that more educated, and higher income persons were more likely to rate the courts low on ability to help crime victims.

Another demographic variable, *political orientation* (often how liberal versus conservative one is) has been found to predict perceptions of criminal justice in some studies. For example, political conservativeness has been associated with more favorable perceptions of the police (Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Gabbidon and Higgins 2009; Jang et al. 2010).

Relevant past experiences also shape perceptions of criminal justice. *Direct personal experience* with the police or courts is a major determinant of citizens' perceptions of the criminal justice system. In general, citizens with prior contact may tend to be more critical (Frank et al. 2005; Kaukinen and Colavecchia 1999; Sun and Wu 2006), although Higgins et al. (2009) found that those with recent experience with the courts were more generally satisfied with the courts. Criminal *victimization* also has an impact. Some studies show that victims, including both personal/violent and property crime

victims, tend to have more unfavorable perceptions of the police or courts (Barboza 2012; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Dukes et al. 2009; Giblin and Dillon 2009; Kaukinen and Colavecchia 1999; O'Connor 2008; Lai and Chao 2010; Sindall et al. 2012).

Neighborhood context is also important. Some studies have linked unfavorable perceptions of criminal justice to unfavorable perceptions of one's neighborhood. Studies utilizing a common neighborhood incivility/disorder variable associated it with unfavorable perceptions of police (Dai and Johnson 2009; Dowler 2002; Giblin and Dillon 2009; Schuck et al. 2008). Schafer et al. (2003) found that those who perceived their neighborhoods as generally good places to live and having a culture of collective responsibility for safety had more favorable perceptions of police services. MacDonald and Stokes (2006) found that perceived "community social capital"—community trust and civic engagement—was positively associated with trust in local police. Disordered neighborhoods can increase residents' fear of or worry about criminal victimization, which has been associated with unfavorable perceptions of the police or courts (Dukes et al. 2009; Giblin and Dillon 2009; Hinds 2009; Kaukinen and Colavecchia 1999; O'Connor 2008; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Shelley et al. 2013).

Media variables have frequently, though inconsistently, predicted perceptions of criminal justice. Most studies associate media with unfavorable perceptions. Weitzer (2002) found that unfavorable citizen attitudes toward the police often dramatically increase following highly publicized incidents of police misconduct. Dowler (2002) found that hours of television viewing was positively associated with perceived police ineffectiveness, but only among respondents with recent police contact. Miller and Davis (2008) found that persons exposed to "bad news about police" and consumers of "highbrow news" were more likely (compared to news abstainers) to perceive the police as prone to misconduct, and tabloid news consumers perceived the police as less effective or responsive. Dowler and Zawilski (2007) found that frequency of network news viewing was positively related to perceived degree of police misconduct among nonwhites and persons with lower incomes. In addition, they found that frequent viewers of police dramas tended to believe that the wealthy receive preferential treatment from police but frequent viewers of crime solving shows did not. Thus, the impact of media may depend on type of representation. Callanan and Rosenberger (2011) found that viewing television news and crime reality shows were positively associated with confidence in police, but only among Whites and persons not arrested, and the relationship among victims was weaker.

Finally, incorporating religious identity measures creates the potential for significantly increased complexity and perhaps confounding results. Most notably, the way religion and race have intersected through history, particularly in the United States, has been fraught with contradictions. Most religious doctrines, particularly amongst the larger religious traditions, stress inclusivity and openness to all of humanity, yet religious justifications were often centrally deployed to support the enslavement of African Americans and the forced migration of Native Americans in 19th century America. The oft-cited "problem of the color line" noted by W.E.B. DuBois (1903) over 100 years ago is perhaps no more apparent than on Sunday mornings at "church hour," which has been called the most segregated hour of the week (Matthews et al. 2016). Furthermore, the African American church has served as the central and perhaps only social institution capable of providing both social protection and enabling mobilization for the long struggle for racial justice (Matthews et al. 2016; Brown et al. 2015; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). So even while some congregations have become more racially diverse in recent years, religious identity is largely and notably shaped in racialized ways. Thus, this study will also examine the interaction between religious and racial identities, as it is quite likely that this interactivity may confound or even alter the individual relationships these identities have on perceptions of effectiveness of police and the courts.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample and Procedures

A self-administered questionnaire was completed by 342 undergraduate students in introductory social science courses at a mid-sized university in the Southeastern US. These were seven face-to-face courses (four sociology, one social problems, and two criminal justice) and three online courses (one sociology, one social problems, and one criminal justice). The survey took place in March and April of 2016. Quantitative data were collected on membership in groups and social categories, demographics, competing predictors, perceptions of crime, and perceptions of criminal justice agencies. No identifying information was collected; questionnaires were completed anonymously. No incentives were given for participation.

In each face-to-face class, the questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the period by one of the researchers, with the assistance of a graduate research assistant. The same researcher and assistant administered the questionnaire in each class. The questionnaire was introduced with a verbal informed consent statement and instructions. After introducing the survey, the researcher left the classroom, before students began completing questionnaires. The graduate assistant collected completed questionnaires and delivered them to another researcher, who stored the questionnaires securely. Another graduate assistant entered data.

In online courses, an invitation to complete an anonymous questionnaire was posted in an announcement, which included a Qualtrics link to an electronic form with informed consent and directions. A reminder was sent about two weeks after the initial announcement. The announcement was also sent to an instructor of a small face to face criminal justice course at a distance campus. The instructor sent the announcement to students in the course through university email and made a verbal reference to it in class. Forty-four (13%) students participated online. In all classes, students were asked to avoid completing the questionnaire again if they attended another class in which the survey was conducted.

Multiple regression analyses examined predictors of two outcome variables: perceived police effectiveness and perceived court effectiveness. As the main predictors of interest, three variables are used as measures of religious identity: affiliation, religious membership (e.g., church), and level of religiosity or spirituality. Further, interaction terms for each measure of religious identity and race are included in a final model. A sizeable body of published research identifies demographic variables, past contact with police or courts, neighborhood quality, victimization, and media influence as major predictors of citizens' perceptions of criminal justice. Thus, measures of these constructs are included in models. In addition, while it has not been established as a predictor in past research, we reason that individuals' tendencies to be relatively optimistic or pessimistic about life in general may shape perceptions of how bad the crime problem is or how well the criminal justice system is doing. Thus, a measure of optimism is also included.

SES measures were not included in the questionnaire. Since participants were undergraduate students in introductory courses, it is likely that most had roughly the same education level. For the same reason, it is unlikely that they varied much in personal incomes. There would likely be little variation in parents' SES as well. Students at the rural, regional comprehensive university tend to be similar in social class backgrounds. In addition, past research tends to identify individual statuses, rather than parents', as predictors of perceptions of police or courts. Excluding SES measures helped keep the questionnaire as brief as possible and minimize personal information about participants. Additionally, the questionnaire included a measure of Hispanic identity separate from self-described race, but this variable is excluded as only 11 respondents identified as Hispanic.

4.2. Measures

The two *perception of criminal justice effectiveness* outcome variables were measured by asking respondents if police and courts in their area "are doing an excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor

job?" Three measures are used to test religious identity as predictors. Respondents were asked to identify their *religious affiliation* from a list of choices including Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Evangelical, Some other type of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, other, and none. Because of very low frequencies in some categories, this variable was recoded as Christian (including the first five categories listed above) or non-Christian. For *religious membership*, respondents were asked (yes or no) if they are "a member of a local church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious or spiritual community?" For religiosity, respondents were asked how religious or spiritual they consider themselves to be: very, somewhat, not particularly, or not at all.

Analyses controlled for five known predictors of perceptions of criminal justice. To provide a general measure of *perceived neighborhood quality*, respondents were asked how safe they feel being outside and alone in their neighborhood at night: very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, or very unsafe. For *victimization*, they were asked (yes or no) if they have "ever been the victim of a violent crime, like assault or robbery?" For past *contact with the police or courts*, they were asked (yes or no) if they (1) had any contact with their "local police or law enforcement officers in the past 12 months" for example "as a victim, witness, suspect, or someone who just called the police" and (2) ever had any contact with their local courts for example "as a jury member, victim, witness, or suspect?" For *media influence*, they were asked how often they watch "reality crime shows, like Cops, Real Policewomen, Cold Justice, and The First 48" in a typical week: 6–7 days, 4–5 days, 2–3 days, 1 day, or rarely. For *optimism*, they were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (strongly or somewhat) with the statement: "The world is a good place."

Finally, four demographic variables were also included as controls. Respondents were asked to write in their *age*. They were asked to select which *race* category best describes them from a list of six categories and "other." Because very few respondents selected categories other than Black or African American and White, a dichotomous measure of whether one is Black or African American is used. Respondents were asked if they describe their *gender* identity as male, female, transgender, or other. No respondents selected transgender or other. For *political orientation*, they were asked how they describe themselves politically on a five point range from very liberal to very conservative, which were collapsed into three categories: liberal, middle of the road, and conservative.

5. Results

Descriptive statistics for each of the variables utilized in the models are available in Table 1. A solid majority of respondents (63.6%) reported a positive view of police effectiveness (excellent, very good, or good), while a similar percentage (62.9%) reported a positive view of the effectiveness of the courts. Regarding the demographics of the sample, 52.4% were African American, 31.6% were male, the average respondent age was 20.2 years old (3.71 SD), and the respondents were mostly self-described as "middle of the road" (48.2%) in terms of political ideology, with slightly more of those remaining (28%) identifying as conservative than liberal (23.8%).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	% or Mean	N or SD
View of Police		
Poor	9.25	31
Fair	27.16	91
Good	35.82	120
Very Good	21.49	72
Excellent	6.27	21
View of Courts		
Poor	5.21	17
Fair	31.90	104
Good	45.71	149
Very Good	14.11	46
Excellent	3.07	10

Table 1. Cont.

	% or Mean	N or SD
African American	52.37	338
Male	31.58	342
Age	20.21	3.71
Political Ideology		
Conservative	27.97	87
Middle of the Road	48.23	150
Liberal	23.79	74
Safe at Night		
Very Safe	26.19	88
Somewhat Safe	43.45	146
Somewhat Unsafe	23.51	79
Very Unsafe	6.85	23
Crime Victim	11.61	336
Contact with Law Enforcement	41.84	337
Contact with Courts	20.18	337
Watch Crime Reality TV		
Rarely	56.92	185
1 day/week	9.85	32
2–3 days/week	15.08	49
4–5 days/week	7.69	25
6–7 days/week	10.46	34
World is a Good Place		
Strongly disagree	19.76	65
Somewhat disagree	35.26	116
Somewhat agree	40.43	133
Strongly agree	4.56	15
Religious or Spiritual		
Not at all or not very	15.64	51
Somewhat	49.69	162
Very	34.66	113
Congregation Member	48.47	326
Christian	84.52	323

Regarding the predictors of perception of criminal justice, a majority (69.6%) reported feeling very or somewhat safe at night. Just over 11.6% had been a victim of a violent crime at some point, while 41.8% had contact with law enforcement and 20.2% had contact with the courts in the past year. Most respondents (56.9%) rarely watched crime reality TV, with relatively equal percentages (roughly 10% each) watching from 1 day/week up to 6–7 days/week. Finally, a slight majority (55%) disagreed strongly or somewhat with the statement that “the world is a good place.”

As relates to religiosity or spirituality, 34.7% reported being very religious or spiritual, 49.7% identified as somewhat religious or spiritual, and 15.6% were not particularly or not at all religious or spiritual. Almost half (48.5%) reported being a member of congregation or religious community of some sort. A clear majority of respondents (84.5%) identified with one of the categories of Christianity.

The results of OLS regression models predicting respondent views of police effectiveness can be found in Table 2. Four models were run, with each additional model including the variables from prior models: (1) individual characteristics; (2) predictors of perceptions of criminal justice; (3) religious identity; and (4) interactions between religious identity and race (African American).

In model 1, African Americans were found to hold highly statistically significant, less positive views of police effectiveness when compared to members of other racial-ethnic groups,

while controlling for all variables in the model. Males reported significantly more positive views of police effectiveness than females, and liberals and those who identified ideologically as middle of the road held less favorable views of police effectiveness than conservatives. Model R-squared was 16%, a relatively high value in this type of research. With the perceptions of criminal justice predictors included in model 2, race, gender and both political ideology variables retained their significance, while only the optimism variable was significant (and positive) amongst the new variables in the model. Model R-squared did improve modestly to 18%.

In model 3, the three religious identity variables were included. All variables that were previously statistically significant remained so, though past crime victimization also became significant at the $p < 0.10$ level. None of the religious identity variables were significant in this model, though, and model R-squared only improved to 19%. Finally, model 4 included interaction terms for the religious identity variables and race (African American vs. Other). In this model, race and political ideology became no longer significant, while the religious congregation membership variable and the interaction between congregation and race both were significant. Substantively, the interpretation of this finding points to the differential effects of participation in formal religious activities for whites and African Americans, as being a member of congregation heightens the already more favorable views that the average white respondent held about police effectiveness compared to the average African American respondent. Conversely, African Americans who are members of religious congregations have much less favorable views of police effectiveness than even other African Americans (0.62 points less in a five-point range), net of other variables, and certainly far less than white congregants (1.1 points less). This model also offered an improved R-squared, increasing to 22%.

The results of OLS regression models predicting respondent views of court effectiveness can be found in Table 3. As above, four models were run, with each additional model including the variables from prior models: (1) individual characteristics; (2) predictors of perceptions of criminal justice; (3) religious identity; and (4) interactions between religious identity and race (African American).

In Model 1, once again African Americans were found to hold highly statistically significant, less positive views of court effectiveness when compared to members of other racial-ethnic groups, while controlling for all variables in the model. No gender or age differences emerged here, but again those who identified ideologically as liberal or middle of the road held highly statistically significant, less favorable views of court effectiveness than conservatives. Model R-squared was 19%. In model 2, race and both political ideology variables retained their significance, while several of the past predictors of criminal justice effectiveness were significant statistically: contact with courts and optimism were positively related, while watching crime reality TV was negative only the optimism variable was significant (and positive) amongst the new variables in the model. Model R-squared improved to 23%.

The three religious identity variables were incorporated into Model 3. All variables that were previously statistically significant remained so in this model. For court effectiveness, unlike police effectiveness, two of the religion variables were found to be significant here, with those who identified as very religious or spiritual holding significantly more favorable views of court effectiveness than those who were not particularly or not at all religious or spiritual, and those were congregation members also being much more positive than others. Model R-squared again increased substantially to 28%. In the final model, interaction terms for the religious identity variables and race (African American vs. Other) were included. In this model, race was the only variable that lost significance, while gender and the somewhat religious or spiritual (versus not particularly or not at all religious or spiritual category) became marginally significant ($p < 0.10$). Other variables that were previously significant retained that significance in this full model, including: political ideology, contact with courts, watching crime reality TV, optimism, the very religious or spiritual category, and congregation membership. Not surprisingly, R-squared only improved slightly, to 29%.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Estimates Predicting View of Police (N = 286).

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
African American	-0.653	0.11	-0.12 ***	-0.631	0.12	-0.30 ***	-0.653	0.12	-0.31 ***	-0.511	0.37	-0.24
Male	0.297	0.12	0.13*	0.255	0.13	0.11+	0.308	0.14	0.14*	0.308	0.14	0.14 *
Age	0.157	0.15	0.06	0.017	0.02	0.06	0.021	0.02	0.07	0.023	0.16	0.08
Political Ideology												
Liberal	-0.375	0.16	0.15 *	-0.399	0.17	-0.02 *	-0.351	0.18	-0.15 *	-0.266	0.18	-0.11
Middle of the Road	-0.263	0.13	0.05 +	-0.299	0.15	-0.14 *	-0.271	0.15	-0.13 +	-0.191	0.16	-0.09
Safe at Night				0.034	0.08	0.02	0.003	0.08	0.00	-0.002	0.08	-0.00
Crime Victim				-0.272	0.18	-0.09	-0.312	0.19	-0.10 +	-0.344	0.19	-0.11 +
Law Enforcement Contact				-0.037	0.12	-0.02	-0.043	0.12	-0.02	-0.661	0.12	-0.03
Watch Crime Reality TV				0.004	0.04	0.01	0.104	0.04	0.14	0.015	0.04	0.02
Optimism				0.146	0.07	0.12 *	0.147	0.07	0.12 *	0.127	0.07	0.10 +
Religious or Spiritual												
Somewhat							0.220	0.20	0.10	-0.004	0.28	-0.00
Very							0.285	0.22	0.13	0.153	0.31	0.07
Congregation Member							0.137	0.13	0.07	0.476	0.20	0.23 *
Christian							-0.092	0.19	-0.31	-0.071	0.26	-0.02
Somewhat Religious X African American										0.387	0.40	0.16
Very Religious X African American										0.173	0.44	0.06
Congregation Member X African American										-0.619	0.27	-0.25 *
Christian X African American										-0.110	0.39	-0.05
R ²	0.16	0.18	0.19	0.22								
F for change in R ²	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00								

Note: + $p < 10$; * $p < 0.5$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Estimates Predicting View of Courts (N = 281).

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		Model 3			Model 4			
	B	SE	β	B	SE	B	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
African American	-0.443	0.93	-0.26 ***	-0.435	0.95	-0.25 ***	-0.452	0.95	-0.26 ***	-0.390	0.29	-0.23
Male	0.144	0.97	-0.08	0.053	0.10	0.03	0.160	0.10	0.09	0.177	0.11	0.10 +
Age	0.006	0.12	0.03	0.001	0.01	0.00	0.006	0.01	0.03	0.005	0.12	0.02
Political Ideology												
Liberal	-0.654	0.13	-0.34 ***	-0.597	0.13	-0.31 ***	-0.461	0.14	-0.24 **	-0.460	0.14	-0.24 **
Middle of the Road	-0.406	0.11	-0.24 ***	-0.377	0.12	-0.22 **	-0.289	0.12	-0.17 **	-0.293	0.12	-0.17 *
Safe at Night				0.002	0.06	0.00	-0.036	0.06	-0.03	-0.038	0.06	-0.03
Crime Victim				-0.199	0.15	-0.01	-0.088	0.14	-0.03	-0.084	0.14	-0.03
Law Enforcement Contact				0.255	0.12	0.12 *	0.288	0.12	0.13 *	0.279	0.12	0.13 *
Watch Crime Reality TV				-0.082	0.03	-0.13 *	-0.075	0.03	-0.13 *	-0.076	0.03	-0.13 *
Optimism				0.138	0.06	0.14 *	0.148	0.05	0.15 **	0.149	0.06	0.15 **
Religious or Spiritual												
Somewhat							0.242	0.15	0.14	0.362	0.22	0.21 +
Very							0.383	0.17	0.21 *	0.415	0.25	0.23 +
Congregation Member							0.285	0.10	0.17 **	0.345	0.16	0.20 *
Christian							-0.135	0.15	-0.06	-0.226	0.20	-0.09
Somewhat Religious X African American										-0.272	0.31	-0.14
Very Religious X African American										-0.010	0.35	-0.04
Congregation Member X African American										-0.102	0.21	-0.05
Christian X African American										0.193	0.30	0.11
R ²	0.19	0.23	0.28	0.29								
F for change in R ²	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00								

Note: + $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

6. Discussion

Results offer partial support for a social identity-based explanation of public perceptions of criminal justice system effectiveness. Membership of a local congregation, in general, was associated with higher ratings of police and court effectiveness. However, denomination was not significantly related to either, and spirituality/religiosity was only marginally (positively) related to perceived court effectiveness. Thus, results are more supportive of a group-based identity explanation rather than one that is self or social category based. It should be noted that the sample was likely not large and diverse enough to test the impact of religious denomination (half of the sample was Baptist, with another 35% identifying as one of a variety of types of Christian). Consistent with past research, political ideology was also a notable predictor, with liberals and centrists giving lower ratings of criminal justice effectiveness than conservatives.

Race predicted views in ways consistent with prior research. African Americans rated criminal justice effectiveness lower than non-African Americans. Once interactions between race and religious identity were incorporated, race itself became non-significant for both views on court and police effectiveness. However, these results showed that among African Americans, being a congregation member significantly reduced rather than increased ratings of police effectiveness. Thus, the tendency of congregation members to favorably view the police was restricted to non-African Americans—i.e., almost entirely whites in the sample studied. The interaction of race and religious identity (specifically congregation membership) did help suppress the effect of being African American to statistical insignificance, though the interaction itself was not statistically significant. In the first instance, it is completely reasonable that African Americans hold less favorable views of the criminal justice system than others, as the past and present relationship between African Americans and the criminal justice system in general, and law enforcement especially, could charitably be described as highly contentious at best and openly hostile at worst. It is also not surprising that religious identity on its own has a significant and positive relationship with perceptions of court and law enforcement effectiveness.

The seemingly incongruous findings related to these perceptions of the criminal justice system that emerge when racial and religious identities intersect also makes sense when one sees membership and active engagement in religious congregations as both central to individual identity and as a highly racially segregated and even often racialized experience—in other words, as [Matthews et al. \(2016, p. 422, italics added\)](#) note, religion “continues to have a paradoxical role in . . . American life, *such that faith can facilitate the empowerment of racial-ethnic minorities and can, alternatively, preserve racial-ethnic hierarchies.*” It is thus no surprise that this empowerment of African-Americans manifests itself in significantly more negative perceptions of institutions that perpetuate and embody, both symbolically and quite literally, continued structured racial inequality.

The study also yielded other interesting results. Men rated criminal justice effectiveness higher than women, which may seem inconsistent with past studies. However, past studies may not have focused specifically on effectiveness at reducing crime. Perhaps women in the sample equated effectiveness with preventing victimization and/or fair treatment of suspects. The finding may be more in line with [Gabbidon and Higgins \(2009\)](#) finding that women were more likely to unfavorably view the police—they believed that officers tended to treat Blacks unfairly. Interestingly, contact with courts increased perceived court effectiveness, which is not necessarily unusual ([Higgins et al. 2009](#)). It may have been that subjects tended to have positive experiences with the courts. However, a vicarious experience—watching crime reality TV shows—was negatively associated with perceived court effectiveness. Past research on media influences are inconsistent, and their impact may depend on the type of representations they give ([Dowler and Zawilski 2007](#)). For example, if viewers frequently see scenarios they disapprove of, an offender receiving a seemingly light sanction for example, they may develop a negative view of the courts. Finally, optimism—which may be considered a personality trait—was positively associated with perceived effectiveness of police and courts. Like religious identity, one’s tendency toward pessimism or optimism may help shape assessments of the criminal justice system.

Results have a general implication for improving relations between criminal justice agencies and citizens. It is important for the public to have faith in the criminal justice system. Distrust in governmental agencies potentially reduces support for the way that public administrators operate (Cooper et al. 2008; Wolak and Palus 2010) and interferes with the community collaboration needed to solve problems such as crime. Private community agencies and individual citizens, not just other governmental agencies, are important actors in carrying out public initiatives (Warm 2011). Tankebe (2013) found that views of the police as legitimate (procedurally and distributively fair, effective, and lawful) increased both citizens' felt obligation to *obey* police and their willingness to *cooperate with* the police (report suspicious activity and crimes and provide information). Although citizens too are responsible for good relations, it is in the best interest of authorities to proactively seek out and build public support.

However, citizens will often not be passive recipients of information and expectations conveyed by criminal justice authorities. When agencies engage in public outreach, collaboration, and education programs, it is important for them to know which members of the population will be less receptive to their efforts and why. Directing campaigns at citizens who already have significant faith in criminal justice agencies may be "preaching to the choir." While maintaining good relations is important, sufficient time and other resources must be directed toward building relations with citizens who have more negative views of, and are thus less likely to support, criminal justice authorities. The current study affirms past research showing that African Americans tend to have comparably less favorable views of the criminal justice system. It further suggests that this tendency is more pronounced among religious African Americans, regarding the police anyway. Thus, in addition to other organizations representing the needs of African Americans, criminal justice agencies should engage in outreach activities with African American places of worship and other faith-based organizations.

The study is of course limited in that cross-sectional data were collected from a relatively small sample. Results cannot be generalized to non-college students, nor to students at other institutions. This study is an exploration into an under-researched topic: the impact of religious identities upon perceptions of criminal justice agencies. Future research is needed to build upon it. This includes replication using other samples as well as qualitative and mixed-method studies. For example, the current study found a correlation between congregation membership and perceptions of police and court effectiveness (and a slight one between religiosity/spirituality and perceived court effectiveness), but qualitative descriptions of religious identities themselves and the processes by which these identities shape perceptions of criminal justice are also needed. The benefits of this line of research would include contributions to the development of social identity theory as an explanation of public perceptions of criminal justice, and to policies and practices intended to improve relations between citizens and criminal justice agencies.

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