

Secondary School Student Attitudes Toward the Police: An Exploratory Study

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As the mandate of the police becomes more extensive, more public support for crime prevention seems necessary. This is especially true in the area of juvenile delinquency. This study attempted to determine attitudes toward the police held by senior high school students in a municipality in British Columbia. A pretest-posttest, quasi experimental design was used. During the experimental treatments the RCMP, who police the municipality, tried to create more positive attitudes. These treatments consisted of either weekly police lectures and discussion during an entire semester (Grade 10), or the incorporation of lectures, discussion, a ride-a-long program, and an incarceration program, in a semestered Law XI class (Grades 11 and 12). At the end of the treatments, analysis of covariance statistics was applied to Grade 11 and 12 posttest results. As matched pretest and posttest data were not available for Grade 10, no statistical analysis is reported. Grade 11 and 12 results indicated that experimental groups were more positive in the attitudes toward the police than were control groups. The study indicated that systematic efforts to create more positive attitudes toward the police were effective, especially when the program was coupled with experiential activities and more in-depth, follow-up work carried out in the Law XI class.

A mesure que s'élargit le rôle des services policiers il semble nécessaire d'obtenir l'appui du public pour assurer une meilleure prévention du crime. Cet appui semble d'autant plus souhaitable qu'il s'agit de délinquance juvénile. La présente étude, effectuée dans une localité de la Colombie Britannique, cherchait à déterminer les attitudes des élèves d'écoles secondaires à l'endroit des policiers. Le devis expérimental de cette recherche comportait un pré-test et un post-test. Au cours de l'expérimentation la Gendarmerie royale du Canada, qui joue le rôle de gardien de la paix dans cette localité, s'efforçait d'établir des relations positives avec la population étudiante. L'expérimentation consistait à tenir pendant tout un semestre des causeries hebdomadaires et des séances de discussions pour les élèves de 10^e année. Le programme comportait aussi des séminaires, des tournées avec les agents de police et des visites de prison avec les élèves de 11 et 12^e dans le cadre d'un cours portant sur la loi. Une fois l'expérience terminée on procéda à une analyse de covariance des résultats du post-test pour le groupe de 11^e et 12^e année. Les résultats d'analyse ont démontré que les attitudes des groupes expérimentaux étaient plus positives que celles des groupes témoins. Cette étude a permis de constater qu'un effort systématique comme celui-ci peut donner des résultats positifs surtout lorsque ces programmes comportent des expériences vécues, et des éléments d'analyse et de travaux pratiques dans le cadre d'un cours sur la loi.

In order to combat crime the police must rely on public assistance. This is especially true in the areas of crime prevention and juvenile delinquency. But if the public is to respond positively to a more supportive arrangement, then public attitudes toward the police must be positive.

The importance of police-school involvement has been well documented. Robinson (1970) cites the following: Combatting the rising rate of juvenile delinquency; creating respect for the law; teaching about the law and the specific legal rights and responsibilities of citizens; creating understanding of the role of the police; combatting drug abuse; and teaching about crime prevention and safety. Many programs exist in Canadian schools, yet despite their perceived importance, few studies have been undertaken on the effects of these programs on students' knowledge or attitudes.

It was for the above reasons that an exploratory study was carried out in two high schools in a municipality in British Columbia. The major objective was to foster positive attitudes toward the RCMP. In order to effect this, Grade 11 and 12 students in a Law XI class, and Grade 10 students in social studies classes were subject to experimental treatments. Pretest and posttest attitude surveys were administered and results from the experimental groups were compared to results obtained from control groups.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Despite the perceived importance of the role of the police in society, and despite the importance of police-public co-operation, relatively few studies have been carried out on public attitudes toward the police, and whether or not attitudes (if negative) can be changed. Hess and Torney (1968) found that, among students in Grades 2 to 8 in the U.S.A., knowledge of the police role was high. Eighty percent of subjects knew that the police worked for the government, yet less than ten percent selected the police as a symbol of "government." Hess and Torney also found that young children had a dual role expectation of the police — they were perceived as punishers and helpers. Overall, the subjects viewed the police role as follows:

Make people obey the law: This percentage increased through the grades.

Help people who are in trouble: This percentage increased through the grades.

Catch people who have broken the law: This percentage decreased through the grades.

Hess and Torney also found that girls, more than boys, favored the police and rated them more highly on role performance competence.

In a specifically police-related study, Bouma and Williams (1972) researched the effect of a police-school liaison program on student attitudes. In two schools in Michigan a police officer was assigned to investigate crimes in the area, counsel students, and give presentations on safety, the law, and alcohol and drug abuse. At the end of the year an attitude

test, previously given prior to the program, was administered, and results compared to two control schools. Results obtained from 3,000 students indicated that there was some deterioration in pro-police attitudes in the experimental schools, but this decline was not nearly as great as that observed in the control schools. The experimental school students generally maintained, overall, a pro-police attitude, with females being more positive than males. Attitudes toward police fairness remained constant in the experimental schools but declined in the control schools. There was a decline in the experimental schools in students' willingness to co-operate in reporting offences to the police, but an even greater decline in the control group results.

In the lower mainland area of British Columbia, Ellis (1973) administered a 38 item pretest and posttest to students in a secondary school and six "feeder" elementary schools. Between November and June, police officers participated in an experimental program. Results obtained at the end of the program indicated that the experimental groups had, overall, more positive attitudes than control groups; however, on some attitude items, attitudes on the posttest were less positive than on the pretest. Generally, students in the experimental groups perceived the police as being fair, friendly, approachable, and competent.

In the Bouma and Williams (1972) and Ellis (1973) studies an attitude test is the dependent variable. The concept "attitude" is difficult to define because it is so closely enmeshed with other concepts such as values, preferences, beliefs, opinions, and emotions. What is clear (Daniels, 1975) is that an attitude is linked with an appraisal, has an object, and is a relatively enduring feature of a person. It seems also to be the case that an attitude is an overall evaluation. This is to say that when one asks, "What's your attitude toward the police?", one does not mean, "What's your moral (aesthetic, economic, political, and so on) attitude?"; one means, "What's your on-the-whole evaluation?" An attitude is, therefore, an organized predisposition to think, feel, perceive, and behave toward a referent or cognitive object. It will involve a cognitive core (what is thought to be true), will often involve emotional reactions, and will contain value standards by which the attitude object is evaluated. To change attitudes, therefore, one could attempt to change the cognitions through direct teaching, or through the creation of dissonance, in which what is thought to be known by the person is shown to be problematic (Festinger, 1957); or through direct experiences (i.e., if a person's attitude toward the police is based on fear, by putting that person with the police in non-fear arousal situations); or through the improvement of a person's understanding of the defensible justification of evaluations.

In this study the view was taken that attitudinal change is not only a function of improving empirical information but also a function of being involved experimentally with the attitude "object."

METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of 60 Grade 10 students (31 male, 29 female), and 97 Grade 11-12 students (35 male and 62 female). The Grade 10 sample ranged in age from 14 years and 8 months to 16 years and 2 months, with the average being 15 years and 5 months. The average age of the Grade 11-12 students was 16 years and 6 months, with an age range of 15 years and 10 months to 18 years. According to teacher ratings, in terms of academic achievement the two Grade 10 experimental classes consisted of one class of low average and one of above average; the control classes comprised one low average and one average to above average. In the Grade 11-12 classes, the experimental Law XI group was judged by teachers to be academically better than the control groups.

The Research Design

The design consisted of an experimental control group, non-random sample, pretest and posttest format. Two schools were involved. In one school, two Grade 10 social studies classes comprised the experimental group, and two the control group. In the second school Grade 11 and 12 students in a Law XI class in Term 1 comprised the experimental group, and a social studies class the control group. This latter study was repeated with another group of students in Term 2.

The Pretest and Posttest Instrument

The instrument consisted of 20 Likert scale items. It contained the following statements to which subjects responded as to whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were undecided, disagreed, or strongly disagreed:

1. The police usually catch the person who has broken the law.
2. The police are not needed in our community.
3. Persons who break the law are treated fairly by the police.
4. If I ever got into trouble with the police, I could buy my way out.
5. The police almost always respond to an individual's request.
6. The police treat all people equally.
7. The police always try to ruin a good time.
8. When you hear a siren your first thought is that the police are going to help someone.
9. A police officer has a very dangerous job.
10. You can never find a policeman when you need him.
11. Police officers often use their guns.
12. A police officer is a normal human being.
13. The police stop and question people because it makes them feel powerful.
14. Policemen are pretty good guys.

15. The police do not care about people's problems.
16. The police rarely give young people a chance to explain anything.
17. The police do not like to hassle people.
18. The RCMP do a pretty good job.
19. The police enjoy roughing up people.
20. The police appreciate people who help them.

The Likert scale is a summated rating scale and all items were considered of approximately equal "attitude value." It attempted to assess an overall evaluation by allowing for intensity of attitude expression. The instrument was considered valid by RCMP officers and items had been used in other studies (Ellis, 1973; Bouma & Williams, 1972). Reliability was checked using an internal consistency estimate (Hoyt, 1941) — pretest = .78; posttest = .82.

Personal data on age, grade, sex, and number of contacts with the police in and out of school were also recorded.

Procedure

The test instrument was administered by classroom teachers prior to the commencement of the study, and immediately following completion. The two-month interval between the two administrations was considered long enough to offset any effect of the pretest on the posttest.

Statistics

Analysis of covariance procedures was used to determine pre-posttest differences in the Term 1 Grade 11-12 experimental and control groups. For all other groups, means and standard deviations were computed, as matched pretest and posttest observations were not available.

The Experimental Program

In both terms police officers were engaged in the Law XI class with Grade 11 and 12 students in the following: lectures and discussions on stereotyping, the role of the police, the concepts of law and crime, the role of the police in crime prevention, job stress as it related to police work, and the rights of students. Role playing was also included — students played the part of a police officer attempting to get a driver's licence from an indignant traffic violator. Many of the topics presented in class were followed up by the Law XI teacher, and each student was required to complete a law-related project. The RCMP also offered to volunteer students who had parental permission a ride-a-long and incarceration program. During the ride-a-long program students spent an entire 4 p.m. to midnight shift with a police officer on patrol. On the incarceration program, students were "arrested," went through all the arrest procedures, and were locked up on their own in a cell for an hour.

Approximately 75% of the experimental subjects participated in both programs.

In the Grade 10 experimental classes the police covered the same topics as in the Grade 11-12 program. Role playing was also engaged in, and a film on police training was shown. Approximately 12 hours were spent from December to March by RCMP officers in these classes.

Control groups continued with their normal activities. As far as can be ascertained there was no formal teaching about the police. However, interaction between experimental and control subjects could not be controlled and there may have been some contamination.

RESULTS

Grade 11-12, Term 1. Table 1 indicates that the posttest differences favored the experimental group.

TABLE 1
*Term 1. Grade 11-12 Experimental and Control Group
Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores and Standard Deviations*

<i>Time</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Pretest	Control	2.20	.42
	Experimental	2.06	.49
Posttest	Control	2.20	.41
	Experimental	1.90	.61

NOTE: Control Group $n = 23$; Experimental Group $n = 25$. The lower the mean, the more positive the attitudes.

As pretest scores indicated that students in the experimental group were more positive in their attitudes toward the police than the control group, analysis of covariance statistics was used (Table 2). Despite the pretest difference, results indicated that pretest to posttest differences were an effect of control or experimental group membership ($p = .02$ in favor of the experimental group).

Grade 11-12, Term 2. As in the Term 1 study, experimental group posttest scores (Table 3) were slightly more positive than control group posttest scores. Whereas experimental group scores became more positive between the pretest and posttest, control group scores became slightly more negative.

Grade 10. Table 4 indicates that there were slightly more positive attitudes in the experimental groups' scores.

Other Results. In all three studies, male and female attitude scores were nearly identical (Male $\bar{X} = 2.36$; Female $\bar{X} = 2.32$).

TABLE 2
*Term 1. Grade 11-12 Analysis of Covariance on Posttest Scores
 Using Pretest Scores as Covariants*

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>Degree of Freedom</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance of F</i>
Covariate = Pretest				
Main Effects	.56	3	2.58	.07
Class (Experimental: Control)	.42	1	5.91	.02*
Grade	.43	1	.59	.44
Sex	.01	1	.08	.78
Residual	2.803	39	.07	

NOTE: $n = 48$.

* Difference is statistically significant.

TABLE 3
*Term 2. Grade 11-12 Experimental and Control Group
 Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores and Standard Deviations*

<i>Time</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Pretest	Control	2.32	.58
	Experimental	2.21	.54
Posttest	Control	2.39	.58
	Experimental	1.99	.34

NOTE: Control Group $n = 25$; Experimental Group $n = 24$. The lower the mean, the more positive the attitudes.

TABLE 4
*Grade 10. Experimental and Control Groups Pretest and Posttest
 Mean Scores and Standard Deviations*

<i>Time</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Pretest	Control	2.32	.48
	Experimental	2.21	.50
Posttest	Control	2.38	.48
	Experimental	2.16	.51

NOTE: Control Group $n = 39$; Experimental Group $n = 31$. The lower the mean, the more positive the attitudes.

In the relationship between the number of student contacts with the police and attitudes, no clear pattern was found. However, the overall trend for all control subjects on both pretest and posttest results was to have more negative attitudes if there was more contact with the police. The overall trend in experimental group results could not be identified; only in the Grade 11-12 results was the pattern one which would be expected, i.e., the more the contact, the more positive the attitudes. Students perceived the police as being heavily involved in traffic duties, in investigating crime, and in paper work. Assisting the public, educating the public, and crime prevention were seen as being of secondary importance.

DISCUSSION

As many possible confounding variables (academic achievement, age range in classes, interaction between experimental and control group subjects, non-random nature of the groups, and teacher variables) could not be controlled, results are only indicative. Yet, although there did not appear to be important differences between the experimental and control groups on pretest scores, the experimental groups consistently scored higher than control groups on the posttest. Mean differences over time do not seem to be importantly different for control groups, yet are uniformly in the predicted direction for experimental groups. The finding, in all cases, that control group posttest scores were either less positive than on the pretest, or remained the same as on the pretest, is borne out in the Bouma and Williams (1972) study also. The implication would appear to be that if one wishes to create more positive attitudes toward the police, then some kind of systematic attempt has to be made. It would seem that it is not enough to let students form their attitudes merely on the basis of what they pick up from such sources as peers, adults, and the media. It would also appear that mere exposure to information is not enough. Whereas in the Grade 10 study slightly more positive posttest attitude scores were indicated for the experimental group, the greatest gains were apparent in the Grade 11-12 experimental groups. In the Grade 10 intervention, students received information and discussed it and participated in one role-playing activity. In the Grade 11-12 studies, the treatment consisted of information-giving, an experiential program (ride-a-long, and incarceration activities) along with the Law XI curriculum. In fact, it is impossible to differentiate RCMP effect from teacher/law effect. This is further compounded by the fact that students in Law XI were volunteers, whereas in the control group social studies classes, students were not volunteers. This may explain the more positive attitudes displayed on the pretest by experimental subjects — they were already “interested” in the law.

That it was difficult to determine the nature of the relationship between student contact with the police and test scores may be due to several factors. First, it was unknown as to whether contact with the police was seen by students in a positive or negative way. The only clear relationship occurred in the Grade 11-12 results, where attitudes were more positive in cases where more police contact was reported. As the RCMP program was designed to increase police-student contact, and as experimental group posttest results were more positive than on the pretest, this relationship is to be expected.

This study indicated that a systematic effort to create more positive attitudes toward the police was somewhat effective, especially when the program contained experiential activities and the more in-depth follow-up work carried out under the Law XI teacher.

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