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In search of the silver-lining: Police officers' attributions and responses to stakeholder critique

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Abstract

Tensions between police organizations and (community) stakeholders have taken center stage in recent years, with an escalation in protests and divisive rhetoric observed in many countries. Using attribution theory, this study examines how police officers interpret negative stakeholder feedback and how these interpretations shape their behavioral responses. Qualitative analysis based on 148 interviews with European police officers shows that officers make six different attributions about the causes of stakeholder critique, and that these have direct implications for their behavioral responses. In particular, these different attribution patterns are found to play a critical and hitherto unrecognized role in shaping police-stakeholder relations and organizational learning among police forces.

Evidence for practice

- Police officers' attributions about the causes of stakeholder critique are critical in shaping their (positive and negative) responses.
- Stakeholder critique can be a valuable source of learning and improvement and can prompt actions that enhance police-community relations.
- Defensive responses to stakeholder critique are a barrier to social accountability mechanisms and widen police-stakeholder divides.

INTRODUCTION

Daily interactions with stakeholders (including citizens, politicians, judiciary, media, and community organizations) are crucial to police officers' roles, due to their central position within society (Benson, 1981). Given the dialectic link between perceptions of police legitimacy in society and public cooperation, police and citizens are especially codependent (Tyler, 2004). Citizens rely on the police for protection and order, while the police's very existence depends on its acceptance as a legitimate societal institution (Manning, 1997). Furthermore, public administration research

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has shown that collaboration between the police and external stakeholders is critical for bottom-line indicators, including crime rates and police performance (Choi & Choi, 2012).

However, at the same time, the police are "subject to intense and often highly critical public scrutiny" (Sillince & Brown, 2009, 1830), with research indicating a tendency for increasingly hostile press coverage in recent decades (Chatterjee & Ryan, 2020). Anti-police protests in the United States and the United Kingdom, following the deaths of George Floyd and Sarah Everard, and the "defund the police" campaign are the latest examples of escalating tensions among police and the communities they serve. Research shows that police officers often feel stigmatized and misunderstood and believe that stakeholders hold biased and unfair perceptions of them (Headley, 2022; Patil, 2019). For instance, a survey by the Pew Research Center based on a nationally representative sample of US officers reported that 68 percent perceived that protests by the public were largely motivated by anti-police bias and 86 percent said that the public failed to understand the risks that officers face (Morin et al., 2017).

Police scholars have long observed the tendency for officers to distance themselves from external stakeholders and to adopt a "we versus they" attitude towards outsiders (Paoline, 2003, 203). Consistent with this narrative, current research is replete with examples of dysfunctionality and tensions in police-stakeholder relations, from reports of "poor police-community relationships" and police officers' "nonresponsive(ness) to community needs" in the United States (Eterno et al., 2017, 191; Headley et al., 2021), to evidence of "us-versus-the public" sentiment among Canadian officers (Workman-Stark, 2023) and violent police-citizen encounters in Brazil (Alcadipani et al., 2024). These negative interactions and feelings of misperception may undermine officers' belief in the value of their work, to the detriment of their relationships with stakeholders and performance outcomes (Patil & Lebel, 2019).

However, the extant literature has been relatively silent on how negative interactions with stakeholders may be used in more constructive ways to, for instance, enrich stakeholder dynamics or enhance organizational learning (Desai, 2015, 2018; Nielsen & Colbert, 2022). This is particularly true in the public administration literature where research into how organizations can effectively respond to stakeholder complaints and encourage positive practices has remained limited (Döring, 2022; Douglas et al., 2019; van de Walle, 2016). Moreover, while the dominant police culture has traditionally been depicted as one that is defined by cynicism, social isolation, and distrust toward citizens, it has increasingly been recognized that officers' attitudes may vary (Paoline, 2004; Paoline & Gau, 2018). Scholars have thus called for further research aimed at understanding the cognitive processes that underlie different orientations towards the public, as well as the strategies that may enable officers to respond to negative feedback in constructive ways, "without alienating outsiders" (Chatterjee & Ryan, 2020, 618; Paoline & Gau, 2018).

Addressing this need, this research examines police officers' interpretations and reactions to stakeholder critique. In doing so, it contributes to the extant literature by providing insights into (a) why police officers respond to stakeholder critique in the way they do; (b) how cognitive (attribution) processes underpin their attitudes towards external groups; and (c) how stakeholder critique can generate constructive police responses rather than further reinforcing "us-versus-them" divides.

ATTRIBUTIONS AND RESPONSES TO STAKEHOLDER CRITIQUE

Negative external feedback or critique represents a salient threat to professionals' work identities, as it challenges how individuals think about their organizations and the work they do (Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Piening et al., 2020). However, research suggests that humans are inherently dismissive of external feedback and find creative ways to reject or explain away critique in order to maintain a positive perception of themselves and their work. In particular, when individuals feel threatened by criticism, they tend to react defensively, minimizing the impact of the critique by making self- or group-serving comparisons or recalibrating, reframing, or refocusing the critique in order to make it more palatable and less threatening to their self-esteem (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006). As such, organizations, in the private and public sector alike, rarely benefit from critical insights or use this feedback to challenge organizational practices and stimulate learning (Brown & Jones, 2000; Brown & Starkey, 2000). Yet, in contrast to these defensive responses, scholars have highlighted the value of more open and constructive approaches to stakeholder feedback in improving organizational practices and creating value (Snell, 2001). Given the benefits of such an approach and the rarity of its occurrence, it appears especially important to determine when street-level bureaucrats will respond positively to negative external feedback and use these insights as a basis for learning and improvement.

Theorists have suggested that one aspect that has been overlooked in past analyses of professionals' responses to negative feedback is employees' attributional processes (Piening et al., 2020). When individuals are confronted with negative feedback, they may be motivated to look for causal explanations for what has happened (Heider, 1958). Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) specifies that individuals may, in particular, try to understand whether behavior was internally or externally caused (the locus of causality dimension), whether it was caused by stable or temporary factors (stability dimension) and whether it was controllable by the actor or occurred outside their control (controllability dimension). The form these attributions take is critical in shaping how individuals subsequently respond. Yet, the extant

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literature has provided limited focus on the impact of attributional processes during bureaucratic encounters (Barnes & Julia, 2018), especially in policing contexts, where relationships are frequently preloaded by notions of bias and distrust.

When external stakeholders critique police actions, officers may be expected to make certain attributions about the causes of this negative feedback. Specifically, according to intergroup attribution theory (Hewstone, 1990; Islam & Hewstone, 1993), individuals will tend to put negative "ingroup" behaviors down to situational, unstable causes that are outside the group's control, while attributing negative "outgroup" behaviors to internal, controllable, and stable factors. In other words, police officers may be expected to "explain away" negative critique as an unfortunate side-effect of the circumstances, while finding culpability in the actions of the external stakeholders who criticize them. This tendency has been documented in studies of dirty work professions, in which workers are found to dismiss the critique of external parties by "condemning the condemners" who criticize them (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine how police officers make attributions about the causes of stakeholder critique and when and why they may respond to stakeholder critique in constructive ways as opposed to reacting in the defensive ways that are typically predicted. More specifically, two research questions are posed, namely, "What kinds of attributions do officers make about the causes of stakeholder critique?" and "how do these attributions shape officers" responses?

CONTEXT, DATA, AND METHODS

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with 148 European police officers between 2012 and 2014. This study follows the tradition of past trans-European research, which has sought to understand police practices and attitudes across the European continent (e.g., Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2023). The sample included 15 police officers from eight European countries, namely Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, and the United Kingdom and 28 officers from two regions of Spain. Seventy eight percent of interviewees were male in line with the demographic composition of the profession. The average tenure was 18.5 years. In line with the sampling strategy, officers were relatively evenly spread across ranks, with 50 officers serving in operational positions (Trainee to Constable on the UK scale of police ranks), 51 in supervisory positions (Sergeant to Chief Inspector), and 47 in senior positions (Superintendent to Chief Commissioner).

Interviews were carried out in the native language of each country or region. All interviewers were native speakers and familiar with policing contexts. A semi-structured interview format was adopted, ensuring that interviews were guided by a standardized set of key questions and prompts, but interviewers had some freedom to follow up on interesting themes that emerged. Officers were asked to describe incidents when they had received critique from community and/or media stakeholders and how they had responded to these claims. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded in the majority (80 percent) of cases, except where tape recordings were not permitted. In the latter case, extensive notes were taken, including verbatim quotes of the officers' descriptions wherever possible. All interviews were substantively rich and lasted for between 30 and 90 min. Full transcripts of all interviews were compiled, and all transcripts were translated, verbatim into English.

DATA ANALYSIS

Transcripts were first read in full in order to identify central themes in the data. The analysis then proceeded following a four-step process, which was guided by both theory and the emerging results. The qualitative software NVivo was used to aid this analysis. First, narrative sequences (or "mini-stories") were identified in which officers' understandings of the causes, explanations and outcomes of stakeholder critique were outlined. In the second step, explicit differences in officers' attributions and behavioral responses to critique were identified. Although this process was largely inductive, relevant theory was also used to inform the analysis. For example, differences in locus of control, stability, and controllability were explicitly examined, in line with attribution theory (Weiner, 1985).

The third stage involved looking for qualitative differences in the patterns of attribution and responses according to the focal stakeholder (citizens or media) and the interviewee's nationality and demographic characteristics. The sample includes officers working in nine European jurisdictions characterized by different levels of centralization and community versus state orientation (Anglo American [e.g., UK], Continental/Napoleonic [e.g., Belgium], and Continental/Federal [e.g., Germany]), which may shape their attitudes towards the public (Calaresu & Tebaldi, 2020; O'Neill et al., 2023). European police systems have different historical roots (e.g., Soviet colonial in the case of Romania and Czech Republic) but went through considerable harmonization processes supported by the European Community and have undergone substantial change to face new societal challenges (e.g., decentralized to centralized, in the Netherlands). At the same time, officers' demographic characteristics may influence their world view (Morin et al., 2017). The third step thus sought to identify any systematic differences in officers' attributions according to these factors.

The final step of the analysis involved cross-checking the findings with police officers and policing experts. This

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TABLE 1 Attribution patterns across countries/demographic profiles.

Attribution	Rank			Country										Age			Gender		
Label	**Ops**	**sup**	**Str**	**BE**	**CZ**	**FR**	**GE**	**IT**	**NL**	**RO**	**SP**	**UK**	**Y**	**M**	**O**	**M**	**F**	**Totals**
Societal role	13	13	11	5	3	1	4	3	3	5	10	3	8	20	9	26	11	**37**
Police culpability	16	13	19	7	4	1	3	4	9	5	9	6	11	27	10	42	6	**48**
Illegitimate stakeholder	17	9	14	3	7	7	3	1	1	4	4	10	10	22	8	29	11	**40**
Uneducated stakeholder	5	4	5	1	1	0	3	4	1	1	2	1	1	12	1	9	5	**14**
Biased societal discourse	2	8	7	2	0	2	1	0	3	2	5	2	2	11	4	15	2	**17**
Relational miscommunication	5	6	1	0	0	1	2	3	1	4	1	0	5	5	2	11	1	**12**

Note: Ranks: Ops = operational level, Sup = supervisory level, Str = strategic level. Country: BE = Belgium, CZ = Czech Republic, FR = France, GE = Germany, IT = Italy, NL = Netherlands, RO = Romania, SP = Spain, UK = United Kingdom. Age: Y = younger aged (18–34 years), M = middle aged (35–50 years), O = older aged (51+ years). Gender: M = male, F = female (no officer reported nonbinary status).

external validation took place in two stages. First, six external workshops (three with more than 40 mid-level and senior-level police officers and three with scholarly experts in policing) and 11 external validation interviews were conducted with representatives of the respective countries during the course of data analysis, with the explicit aim of checking the validity of the emerging interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In a second step, after the completion of data analysis, a small workshop (with six police officers) and five additional external validation interviews were conducted with officers from the respective countries to verify the final findings.

FINDINGS

Attributions of external critique

Six different attribution patterns were identified in the analysis, reflecting different perceptions regarding the locus of causality, stability, and controllability of the critique. These attributional patterns are labeled as (1) Societal role, (2) Police culpability, (3) Illegitimate stakeholder, (4) Uneducated stakeholder, (5) Biased societal discourse, and (6) Relational miscommunication. Most officers cited only one attribution pattern when describing the causes of critique. However, a small number of officers combined multiple attributions in their explanations. Crucially, while the specific circumstances may have varied for officers in different countries and with different (age, rank, and gender) demographics, these six attribution patterns were found to be broadly applicable across the sample (see Table 1).

Societal role

In line with intergroup attribution theory, 37 officers made "societal role" attributions—attributing critique to stable, situational causes, outside of the police officers' control. This attribution was typically characterized by normative explanations or the belief that critique was a natural feature of police roles. Such explanations resonate with Nielsen et al.'s (2022, 1913) recent findings that negative interactions with stakeholder beneficiaries are often attributed to the "nature of one's work" rather than to workers' own conduct. When asked about stakeholder critique and the difficult relationship between police and the public, one officer simply replied, "It has always been [that way]. It's no surprise. When you join the police, you know people won't love you. It's the same with the tax administration. That's the way it is" (N.36). As such, officers dismissed the critique from stakeholders as a natural and expected part of the job. In addition, they reasoned that police work was especially prone to these tensions, due to the police's unique role in society. Exemplifying this view, another officer remarked, "When there is a conflict, citizens often say, 'It's the police!' Man, I understand that this is within normality. If I give fines or don't let someone go by some road or I don't allow an illegal demonstration, it falls within normality, at least to me, that citizens are a bit unhappy" (N.124).

In other cases, officers explained that faults and critiques were inevitable in any profession and that it is impossible for large organizations like the police to eliminate critiques entirely. Thus, negative stakeholder feedback was regarded as an unavoidable and uncontrollable feature of police life. One officer explained, "come on, we are such a large organization…and sometimes things go wrong…you work on safety, but it doesn't always work out. And it can't. Impossible. Sometimes it doesn't work out and sometimes it does" (N.83).

Police culpability

Forty-eight officers made "police culpability" attributions – attributing the critique to the internal failings of the insider (police) ingroup. Specifically, they reasoned that the police were culpable for the critique they received from stakeholders as they had erred in some way and had fallen below acceptable standards. As such, instead of making the group-serving attributions predicted by intergroup attribution theory, these officers directly

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attributed the critique to the failings of the police ingroup. Describing his feelings of responsibility for specific incidents of stakeholder critique, one interviewee commented, "Yes, embarrassment, that is particularly internal shame, inside, when I say actually, I am not proud of this as the head of a police corps. That is when a specific case is not handled well. And if you get a complaint from a civilian… My first reaction was 'no, here we failed, this is not good.' That is of course an internal shame, and I feel responsible for this" (N.9).

Importantly, in these instances, stakeholder critique was regarded as legitimate and fair as the police were deemed culpable for the condemnation they received. As such, stakeholders were regarded as having a legitimate right to voice their dissatisfaction and concern. Encapsulating this sentiment one officer explained:

> If people criticize [the police], we have to go deeper into this. We have to know why. There may have been abuses, as we have recently seen in [a local city]. Those policemen did not work properly…[When] policemen do their job I almost never heard someone telling me 'you are useless'…look, as long as people ask questions and try to know how the police work, it is completely legitimate (N.44).

Officers who made these attributions took internal responsibility for critique and regarded stakeholders' feedback as valid and justified. Yet, at the same time, they also attributed the critique to unstable and controllable causes that were both impermanent and changeable. As highlighted in the section below, this attribution process opened the door for officers to use critique as a source of learning and improvement.

Illegitimate stakeholder

Forty interviewees made "illegitimate stakeholder" attributions, attributing critique to the internal, stable, and pernicious intentions of the stakeholder group who criticized them, rather than to any culpability on the part of the police. These officers commonly described the police as "scapegoats" and explained that stakeholder groups were quick to criticize the police, even when this critique was thoroughly unjustified. Stakeholders' actions were thus regarded as both stable and (from the police's perspective) uncontrollable, as officers perceived that stakeholders were willfully intent on belittling and undermining the police, irrespective of the police's actual conduct and performance. One officer remarked:

> I dislike the fact that we've become the public's whipping boy and when we make a mistake it cancels out every single good thing that we ever did. Because the papers aren't actually that bothered, nor are the news channels about publishing what the police have done that's good. When they do it's "who cares". But when the police have done something bad or it's viewed that we've done something bad, when somebody in our situation at that time making that decision may have done exactly the same thing, we're hung out to dry (N.147).

Officers often described personal experiences of unfair criticism that they or their colleagues had received from media and citizen stakeholders. Explanations for media critique were especially prone to these kinds of explanations. In particular, officers attributed police critique to a "corrupt press" and to journalists' attempts to purposely manufacture an unflattering vision of the police through highly biased and antagonistic coverage. One officer commented, "I think that the media take side with the thugs rather than the police these days. For instance, when it comes to urban violence, the journalists are mainly interested in police abuses. Nothing else…They only want to speak about police abuses" (N.45). Hence, in these accounts, officers suggested that the media were almost entirely motivated by an "unscrupulous" desire to sell newspapers or garner social media "clicks", regardless of the legitimacy or veracity of their reports.

Uneducated stakeholder

Fourteen officers made "uneducated stakeholder" attributions. In this case, they attributed negative feedback to the inaccurate views of stakeholder groups, but suggested that situational, unstable causes were to blame. In particular, they reasoned that critique was often attributable to stakeholders' ignorance and inability to understand police actions. Critique emanating from these "misinformed" stakeholders was thus rationalized as a product of outsiders' ignorance rather than their desire to harm the police, or indeed the police's own failures. This explanation was especially common when officers described critique originating from citizens. One officer commented, "We don't have to be surprised that they sometimes hate our guts. Of course, I can completely understand this. Because the citizen out there, he doesn't know why, so, for which reason. He cannot look behind the scenes. And if one doesn't attempt to explain, well, he will always be frustrated" (N.51). Similarly, another officer explained, "most people only know [the police] by their uniforms, their big cars, and the less stripes the more fines you get. You know, that's kind of the attitude people have… most of the time people don't have a clue about how this organization works" (N.78).

Biased societal discourse

Seventeen officers blamed critique on "biased societal discourse." In this case, they combined the "illegitimate"

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and "uneducated" stakeholder attributions described above – directly attributing citizens' misinformed critiques of the police to the unbalanced and misleading portrayals of police in the media. The media were thus accused of manufacturing a hostile perspective, which dominated societal discourses and undermined the public's understanding of the police. One officer commented that recent media coverage "gets me quite angry because they've just printed false information basically, not got any information from us but just picked up on the story and ran with it, without any facts or information. That does get me annoyed because…the public haven't got the full picture really or the truth" (N.145), while another explained, "yes, the media plays a whole 'influencing' role when it comes to citizens…so people get the wrong idea…and it bothers me, I think 'wait a minute, this had to be better directed by the media'… and it is very, very dangerous. If you influence the people around you that way they will maybe get the wrong idea" (N.81). These findings resonate with research showing that US officers perceive media coverage as broadly hostile and believe that this hostility has an adverse impact on citizens' perceptions and community relations (Nix & Pickett, 2017).

Relational miscommunication

Finally, 12 officers attributed critique to "relational miscommunication", thus combining the "police culpability" and "uneducated stakeholder" attributions described above. Rather than blaming the media, these interviewees made internal attributions about the causes of citizens' misinformed critiques – reasoning that stakeholders' ignorance was often fueled by the police's own inability to communicate effectively. One officer remarked:

> I regret that the police force doesn't communicate more clearly with the public, in my personal opinion. Those are our fellow human beings with whom we have an agreement on the monopoly about legitimate use of force. Media plays a role, but the police doesn't react in a conscious and open way… and I think it is the responsibility of the police to be transparent enough and invest enough (N.76).

Similarly, another officer stated, "at the basis of misunderstanding of our professional role there is probably a communication problem. [Our police force's] communication policy is very weak and for this reason people aren't aware of our precise duties and responsibilities" (N.68). In these instances, officers saw a need to address these gaps in knowledge and better inform the public about the police's role in order to reduce misperceptions and unfounded claims.

Responses to different attributions of critique

The next stage of analysis addressed officers' responses to critique. Please see Table 2 for a summary of the different attribution-response outcomes identified and Table 3 for illustrative quotes.

Responses to "societal role" attributions

When officers believed that critique was due to the police's societal role, they reasoned that such claims should not be given any great heed, as negative feedback was a normal by-product of stakeholder dynamics and their profession's position in society. Critique was thus seen as a natural and inevitable part of police roles and officers did not feel that it warranted any meaningful response or that any lessons could be learned. Instead, the critique was typically dismissed and ignored. When asked whether he felt ashamed when the police were criticized by the public or the media, one officer responded, "No, why would I?! Yes, when things go wrong, incidents and stuff. Of course, you sometimes think like; 'well that's really a pity'. But in general, …sometimes things go wrong. Should I therefore be ashamed for being a police officer? No, not at all" (N.83).

Similarly, another officer suggested that she was easily able to brush away stakeholders' critique without giving it much thought. She explained, "Somehow you ignore it all… I think you do nothing. I don't have to overcome anything. It's something that's there. It'll happen and keep happening. You can't help it" (N.122). Thus, as officers regarded critique as beyond their control and inevitable regardless of their conduct, they saw no reason to adjust their methods or learn anything more substantial from the feedback given. At the same time, officers who made "societal role" attributions did not react negatively to the critique they received, and it did not materially damage their relationships with external stakeholders as it was considered to be natural and expected. The impact was therefore "neutral" in the sense that neither a change in police-community relations nor learning took place.

Responses to "police culpability" attributions

Conversely, when officers attributed critique to police failures, they regarded external feedback as an important and useful tool in challenging existing practices and highlighting areas for development and improvement within the police. One officer remarked, "each situation [of critique] has a meaning… periodically it is necessary to have some assessments of the professional integrity, honesty, and correctness. In my opinion, I consider this a must" (N.93). This tendency to assume internal responsibility for stakeholder critique was therefore associated

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TABLE 2 Attributions and responses.

Attribution label	Attribution count	Attribution characteristics	Learning/educating responses	Stakeholder-related responses
Societal role	37	Police situational, uncontrollable, stable attribution	***Dismissive*** of police learning opportunities	***No*** particular stakeholder-related response
Police culpability	48	Police internal, controllable, unstable attribution	Police ***learning***	***(Re)building*** police-stakeholder relations
Illegitimate stakeholder	40	Stakeholder internal, stable, uncontrollable attribution	***Dismissive*** of police learning opportunities	***Reinforcing 'us-versus-them'*** divides
Uneducated stakeholder	14	Stakeholder situational, controllable, unstable attribution	***(Re)educating*** stakeholders	***Partnership working*** and community initiatives
Biased societal discourse	17	Stakeholder internal, stable, uncontrollable attribution *(media)*	***Dismissive*** of police learning opportunities *(media)*	***Reinforcing 'us-versus-them'*** divides *(media)*
		Stakeholder situational, controllable, unstable attribution *(citizens)*	***(Re)educating*** stakeholders *(citizens)*	***Partnership working*** and community initiatives *(citizens)*
Relational miscommunication	12	Police internal, controllable, unstable attribution	Police ***learning***	***(Re)building*** police-stakeholder relations
		Stakeholder situational, controllable, unstable attribution	***(Re)educating*** stakeholders	***Partnership working*** and community initiatives

with active behavioral responses, including a willingness to learn from the feedback given and address current failings. One officer explained, "when [my unit's] work is subject to external criticism, this leads us to consider our actions in order to understand if and where there has been a mistake, and to improve our professionality and approach" (N.67).

As well as fostering learning among insiders, these attributions encouraged officers to take an active approach towards community relations, reestablishing and rebuilding their relationships with external stakeholders. Officers acknowledged that police-stakeholder relations were likely to have been undermined and damaged by past police actions and failures. As such, they sought to communicate with external parties and rebuild these broken relationships. When discussing how he responded to a recent example of critique in the media, one officer commented: "The way you get round that is just by having really good neighborhood policing, and actually constantly reengaging with the public and saying, 'We're here, we're your local police and that is not what the police are like, that's an exception'." (N.140). Hence, this type of attribution invited internally directed changes, namely, organizational learning, as well as externally directed changes, namely, repairs to community relationships.

Responses to "illegitimate stakeholder" attributions

When officers made "illegitimate stakeholder" attributions for outsider critique, they rejected the feedback out of hand, seeing no reason to address stakeholders' concerns or incorporate the critique in their thinking. Instead, officers perceived that the feedback was illegitimate and was thus worthless as a source of learning or consideration. One officer remarked, "I do not believe the information the media submit – due to the fact that I know how they manipulate the information… [I thus] attach them no importance" (N.27), while another explained, "it's always very irritating, because the way the media speaks of us is always partial…[Hence] staff has sometimes been criticized, from the outside or the inside, but it has never changed anything in our methods or our missions" (N.31).

This pattern of attribution thus led to the rejection of critique as a source of learning and improvement, similar to the "societal role" attribution-response pattern described above. However, unlike this pattern, illegitimate stakeholder attributions also appeared to have a detrimental effect on police-community relationships – reinforcing stakeholder divides. One senior police chief even commented that his attempt to reach out to the media following a complaint was regarded by many colleagues as "engaging with the enemy" (N.90). In addition, these attributions were often associated with profound tensions between police and stakeholder groups. One officer explained:

> One feels the rejection. Meaning, if, for example, the applicants of demonstrations do not want to speak with us, who then completely renounce their willingness to cooperate. Where I say: "Just because I wear a uniform, one doesn't have to reject me as a person." But there one is being reduced to be police and not a person…the press is not brought

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TABLE 3 Illustrative quotes of attribution-response patterns.

Attributions and responses	Illustrative quotes
Learning/educating responses	
Dismissive of critique/police learning opportunities Responses to "societal role" attributions	"I also know how to relativize things. I mean, perhaps I have good enough defense mechanisms so that certain things don't affect me because I understand them as occurring naturally or I understand them as the fruit of how this society runs" (N.128). "We know that our job, yes, people have the tendency to write criticism on policemen in the newspaper quickly. That is how it is. And that just belongs to the job. So, you should tone it down a bit – put it in the right perspective…it belongs to the job that you are criticized" (N.4). [Responding to a question about if he ever felt embarrassed due to stakeholder critique] "No, not at all. That is inherent to the job. It is logical…that is our modern society. I do not care too much. I will easily relativize [it] if something happened" (N.12).
Police organizational learning Responses to "police culpability" attributions	"On the contrary I am very shocked when I hear things…. I am not very proud to belong to such a profession…[but] there are things that are happening internally…. we take into account a number of critics and remarks, to try to ameliorate the system" (N.13). "What bothers me most about my job is when other colleagues don't do their job as they should or as I'd like them to…The good thing for me is that since I'm in command I can control the solution or at least try to cut it off at the roots…I try to take steps to prevent this from happening" (N.130). "In relation to the error of police officers, with regard to my profession, I try to consider if I took part in the wrong choice of the employee. I draw a lesson from that feedback" (N.22). "Well, sometimes you are less proud because a policeman or woman has done something that is inadmissible, and it is quite widely publicized on the news…I think that's a shame. I reflect on my own processes and which I myself – where I'm responsible for and manage, and where I am also able to fine-tune, can change…then I think, you will learn from this" (N.85).
Dismissive of critique/police learning opportunities Responses to "illegitimate stakeholder" attributions	[Discussing his belief that the media provide a biased, limited perspective on the truth] "You sometimes just think 'it's a snapshot that – put the full truth out' and you just get frustrated, and you just learn to sort of ignore it" (N.144). "I think I am almost desensitized to what's portrayed about us in the press" (N.146). "I have no feeling of shame, because I know how it really is. There's a bit of truth in every gossip. But what is hyped, is distorted. I'm not at the source, but I know that what is said is not always true… I do not solve it. I take it as it is. It's just one side of the coin … I cannot influence that" (N.23).
(Re)educating stakeholders Responses to "uneducated stakeholder" attributions	"We try to explain to them the situation, how things stand in reality. Some understand and some don't. But, generally with good words…we try to solve them" (N.102) [In response to interviewer question Do citizens criticize these operations a lot?] "Yes, of course. The squatter or football supporter criticize us and me. And I do understand this. It is not possible to see everything in perspective…The only thing you can do at that moment is to explain to somebody who asks [what actions were taken and why]". [Interviewer: Do people understand?] "Yes, people understand, as a result of my openness" (N.76). "Above all I like to explain to people why the police is such a magnificent and great organization… And I always like to explain to those people, and I always do that, what kind of a great and fantastic organization it actually is with a lot of passionate people…. Most of the time people don't have a clue about how this organization works…And that is my job to explain as a spokesman for the police, like 'this is the way it works, and this is how the real-world sticks together'." (N.78).
Stakeholder-related responses	
(Re)building stakeholder relations Responses to "police culpability" attributions	[Discussing recent critique that the police had received in a local area] "My experience tells me that the events in [city name] won't do any good to us. How can we be trusted afterwards? After 12 years in the [police unit name], when I hear that… Then when you're on an operation in a violent neighbourhood, how [can you] be credible? If the population tell us, 'Why should I obey you, have you seen what happens there?' What can we answer them? After that, we have to slowly rebuild the links with the population" (N.35). "You can see that [critique] in the news as well and for me I do feel embarrassed… Because for me that means that when someone else sees that, I'm the next person walking through their door delivering whatever message or I'm doing something then I've lost that battle really and it'll take more for me to regain my professionalism in their eyes if you know what I mean…. Whereas you might have had someone who was open minded to have seen that on TV or they treat it a certain way and that's it now we've lost them as a supporter of the police and a potential intelligence source a potential support for other things so it does yea, it embarrasses me…[I] realize that you have to build those bridges back again by showing your human side, because I think people forget that you are [human] once you get this uniform on" (N.137).

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TABLE 3 (Continued)

Attributions and responses	Illustrative quotes
Reinforcing "us-versus-them" divides Responses to "illegitimate stakeholder" attributions	"If there is an accident, we are faulty. Even if the motorbike is stolen, if the driver doesn't wear a helmet, if he drives like a madman… If he causes an accident, we will be responsible. So, we feel a great frustration in our relationship with the population, and also with the media. The media do not know what they are talking about. They do not know 1 percent of what happens in the police" (N.39). "Where I think, of course, one must not forget that the image of the police officer in public is already quite crippled. At least that is how we see it. I do not know how that is in [another state] now, but at least in [name of city], the police is seen rather in a distanced and differentiated way…I personally get simply angry, because I think that the majority of the [name of city] police does a good job. And every single colleague, too. But this is not really being proclaimed. It is rather the opposite that in general it is regrettably the case with the media, nowadays, that only bad news can be sold. And it is the case that the police can work well a 100 times. Once in any kind of way there is a mistake and that this is being exploited… But it is always exactly this one aspect, where something goes wrong for whatever reason, and that is being exploited…I do think that the image did change somehow. And that the police is liked to be seen as a scapegoat for everything" (N.46).
Partnership working and community initiatives Responses to "uneducated stakeholder" attributions	"Often then there is a lack of comprehension, of course. Often things are also presented falsely…if one has built up a relationship of trust, then one can also try to straighten certain things out again and again, or else also to have the police work be presented differently. Also, to get rid of certain imaginations…Use the chance when we have the open days, in all these authorities and facilities. Get some comprehension and then it is important to me that one stays in discussions with those who were concerned, or are concerned, before such a think boils up" (N.55). "I feel that people do not really know how the police work" (*Interviewer*: *How did you deal with and get over this negative feeling?*) "Most of the times I collaborate with the labor union which works directly with the heads of the organization but also with politicians. One of the labor union goals is to erase this negative image that the police has within the society" (N.108).

> or forced to do clean research. That is the one part. And the other part is that others get their forum to kick off any kind of opinion and it is just written there like that. And *we* are the ones who treat everyone badly… (N.49).

Officers thus expressed resentment and anger at stakeholder critique, which they regarded as unfounded and unwarranted. This attribution of critique to the internal, controllable, and pernicious nature of the stakeholder further served to reinforce the divide between police "insiders" and stakeholder "outsiders", undermining police-citizen engagement and causing a deterioration in police-community relations in society.

Responses to "uneducated stakeholder" attributions

Conversely, when officers made "uneducated stakeholder" attributions, they recognized that the causes of the critique were unstable and controllable and that it was therefore possible to intervene in order to modify stakeholders' (misinformed) views. Thus, officers sought to respond to stakeholder critique in an active way by (re)educating stakeholders and attempting to correct misperceptions. Interestingly, in contrast to officers' responses to "police culpability" attributions, which focused on changing the police "ingroup", this response focused on changing "the others" that is, (re)educating the stakeholder "outgroup" so that they were less likely to make "misinformed" critiques in the future. One officer explained that criticism was "most of the times because of a lack of knowledge. Then I think well, you are naïve, you don't know any better". This officer went on to describe how through reeducation efforts "I do get an understanding" among stakeholders (N.87).

These explanations of stakeholder critique also encouraged officers to reinvest in communication, partnership working, and community relations initiatives. Indeed, when discussing how best to respond to stakeholders' misinformed criticisms, one officer explained:

> It's got to be through communication, and the best way of that is normally face-to-face. I think there can be a lot of misunderstandings from emails flying to and fro and it's all about getting into the community, going to the meetings, meeting these people. Saying "in an ideal world what would you like us to do?" and then working from there saying "okay, I appreciate that. However, we can't do that for you, but we can do this, this, and this". And it's about meeting them half-way and explaining why we can't do it. Whether it's to do with resources, whether it's to do with legislation, effectively that's another partner's job. We need to bring the partner into this meeting and facilitate that (N.134).

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Hence "uneducated stakeholder" attributions led to active and positive engagement with stakeholders aimed at education and teaching.

Responses to "biased societal discourse" attributions

When officers attributed citizens' ignorance to the false accounts provided by the media, they often sought to counter the media's "illegitimate" claims by teaching the public about the true nature of policing. Explaining how best to respond to media misinformation towards the public, one officer commented, "well, you try your best to get good news out there about stuff that you're doing and try to put the story straight really if you can" (N.145). Similarly, when discussing his response to a specific incident that was publicized in the media, another officer commented, "what embarrasses me is that media generalized the situation and did not explain [the context behind the incident] …I try to let [citizens] know that the truth is not always shown by the media. I tell them that there is always a second part of the story" (N.119).

Crucially, these different attributions regarding the causes of citizen and media critique had a profound effect on officers' responses towards these groups, encouraging the reeducation of citizens, while resulting in the rejection of media critiques and a hardening of the relationship between the police and media stakeholders. Indeed, officers often contrasted their own legitimate practices and procedures with the perceived irresponsibility of media conduct. One commented, "we are personally taught not to make a judgment without all the necessary elements about the guilt or innocence of a citizen, but in the media the police is systematically under attack…journalists always tell about the 'victims' of the police. The innocence of the civilians is presumed, the guilt of the police is presumed" (N.31). Media critiques were therefore rarely considered to be legitimate or valid, and the media were found to have little voice in challenging police actions as their criticisms were largely dismissed as illegitimate and baseless. At the same time, these perceptions appeared to sharpen the dividing lines between the police "ingroup" and a seemingly adversarial media "outgroup". Conversely, citizens were regarded as "victims" of media biases, and a non-malicious, and uneducated (naïve) stakeholder group that requires education and information.

Responses to "relational miscommunication" attributions

Conversely, when officers reasoned that it was miscommunication on the part of the police that led to stakeholders' misunderstandings, they responded by both better educating the stakeholders about the true nature of policing and by altering their own practices. Specifically, officers actively sought to change their internal practices and procedures to adopt more effective communication policies towards stakeholders. One officer explained, "we have to try to communicate in such a way that everybody understands us…it's mandatory, critical. There are situations in which we make mistakes or [the citizens] make mistakes, and we have to communicate… good communication can solve anything" (N.102). Similarly, another officer commented, "there is no communication towards the public. That is a problem of [my police force]. It does not communicate at all…there is a great deal of work to be done there…I think more communication could change things" (N.33). These attributions were thus associated with a desire to both teach stakeholders about the reality of policing and to improve internal communication practices in order to engage more effectively with the community.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the attribution patterns elicited disparate behavioral responses (no response, police internal changes, i.e., organizational learning, and/or community-directed changes, i.e., teaching/education) as well as disparate consequences for police-community relations (no change, a deterioration, or an improvement in police-stakeholder relations).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article examines police officers' attributions and reactions to stakeholder critique based on interviews with 148 serving European officers. In doing so, it provides a number of contributions to the extant literature.

First, this article sheds light on how attribution processes shape officers' perceptions of external feedback. Analysis revealed that officers made six primary attributions about the causes of critique and that these different attributions were vital in determining their attitudes and behaviors towards relevant stakeholders. As such, this article elucidates the cognitive processes that underlie individuals' responses to external feedback (Harvey et al., 2014; Piening et al., 2020). In doing so, it contributes to a small but growing body of literature that examines how attributional processes shape relationships between street-level bureaucrats and the public they serve (Barnes & Julia, 2018; James et al., 2016).

Second, responding to recent calls (Chatterjee & Ryan, 2020, 618), this article provides insights into how and why police officers' responses to stakeholder complaints may "exacerbate or enhance community relations". Specifically, while "police culpability" and "uneducated stakeholder" attributions were found to be associated with constructive attempts to engage with stakeholders, "illegitimate stakeholder" attributions were found to accentuate differentiation and division. Thus, officers' attributions about stakeholder critique were

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crucial in shaping and reinforcing (positive and negative) dynamics. Traditional depictions of police culture have long-referenced a distrust of outsiders and an "us-versus-them" attitude towards citizens (Paoline, 2003). These findings provide an explanatory mechanism for this dynamic, specifically showing that officers' attributions and reactions to stakeholder critique may perpetuate the "blue wall of silence" (Chin & Scott, 1998) and reinforce divisions between police ingroups and stakeholder outgroups. Yet, this study also shows that cognitive processes may be equally crucial in underpinning *positive* bureaucratic encounters by encouraging officers to build more constructive stakeholder relationships through reeducation, partnership working, and community initiatives.

Third, the findings have important implications for police learning. The analysis showed that when officers made "police culpability" or "uneducated stakeholder" attributions, they used the critique to drive process improvements within their organizations or to engage more actively in educating the public. Conversely, when officers made "illegitimate stakeholder" or "societal role" attributions, they dismissed critique out of hand and failed to use it as a basis for development or professional practice improvement. Furthermore, it emerged that officers' willingness to pursue internal change (i.e., police learning) versus "other" change (i.e., stakeholder reeducation) depended on whether they attributed critique to internal (police) or external (stakeholder) causes. By being cognizant of the potential risk of defensive attributional processes, as well as disparities in officers' openness to within (police) versus outside (stakeholder) change interventions, it is hoped that managers can better plan formal strategies to exploit and leverage stakeholder feedback. Indeed, although formal complaints commissions already play a critical role in initiating service improvements (Walsh & Conway, 2011), these findings suggest that a more systematic approach may be necessary in order to encourage active learning cultures within police organizations.

Fourth, these findings have broader implications for issues of stakeholder voice and organizational governance and accountability. In particular, they show that stakeholders may be denied the right to actively challenge police organizations, if officers make certain attributions about the causes of their critique. Indeed, it is noteworthy that "illegitimate stakeholder" attributions focusing on the media essentially precluded this stakeholder from having an active voice in challenging police practices. Similarly, even though officers showed a greater desire to listen to and incorporate the perspectives of citizens, they were often dismissive of the underlying credibility of citizens' claims, attributing them to collective ignorance rather than to any more legitimate basis. As such, officers' attributions directly influenced their willingness to grant an active voice to stakeholders and to use their claims to inform internal decision-making.

This observation is particularly consequential when we consider the key role that stakeholders play in the external governance and control of public sector organizations. Indeed, research increasingly testifies to the importance of stakeholder governance mechanisms and community engagement in holding public sector organizations to account (Brewer, 2007; Tavares et al., 2022). This function is especially critical in organizations like the police, which operate at the center of society. Police organizations are highly accountable to citizens, while the media perform an important social control function within a democratic society, acting as "a watchdog on the police and other public bodies" (Mawby & Wright, 2005, 12). In this context, the impact of attributional processes that restrict stakeholder voice appears especially relevant, as by limiting stakeholders' capacity for active voice, such processes undermine the basic effectiveness of stakeholder governance and social accountability mechanisms (Brewer, 2007).

The greater awareness of such factors may be of practical use in mitigating these impacts and strengthening stakeholder oversight of the police and other public administrators (Ali & Pirog, 2019). Formal interventions to promote constructive attitudes toward stakeholders may also prove useful. For instance, promising results from a small pilot study suggest that officers may be positively impacted by active attempts to counteract the negative police-citizen narrative, by providing them with examples of how citizens have benefitted from their actions (Grant, 2008). Attention should also be paid to the selection and training of officers to promote constructive and open attitudes towards stakeholders. Selecting recruits with public service motivations when entering the police (Christensen et al., 2017) appears to be an especially pressing concern given evidence that new recruits' initial motivations often persist and continue to be relevant in driving their actions long into their service (Oberfield, 2014). At the same time, formal socialization and training methods—perhaps including the introduction of peer role models who exemplify constructive police-stakeholder relationships—may be valuable in bringing about culture change in forces that have long held a cynical view of outsiders (Paoline & Gau, 2018). Finally, public communication initiatives aimed at developing effective interfaces between the police and key external parties may be valuable (Brenninkmeijer, 2016; Ho & Cho, 2017). It is hoped that through such measures, public administrators may be better able to foster learning cultures in their organizations and build more constructive relationships with the communities they serve, which may, in turn, increase public knowledge and understanding of police work.

Of course, as with all research, this study has some limitations, which may be usefully addressed in future research. First, some time has passed since the initial interviews were carried out. Although this may raise questions about the study's contemporary relevance, ongoing

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discussions with police officers in the intervening years (including in 2023) have confirmed the applicability of the findings to current police realities. Nevertheless, follow-up studies would be useful, for example, to examine the specific dynamics associated with critiques stemming from (new trends in) social media use.

Second, while the six attribution-response patterns were found to be broadly applicable across countries/ demographic groups, understanding the impact of other demographic dimensions may be important. For instance, past research has suggested that race may be a relevant determinant of officers' attitudes, particularly in a US context (Headley, 2022; Morin et al., 2017). Although "the general level of diversity (defined in terms of gender, migrant background, and sexual orientation) is low" across European police forces (van Ewijk, 2012, 76), the impact of race on policing has gained attention in Europe in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement (Carvalho et al., 2022). Thus, further research exploring this aspect, as well as examining the implications of the findings for the US context would be beneficial.

In addition, a promising avenue for future analysis concerns the potential role of political values in determining officers' attributions and responses. In an investigation of US officers, Patil (2019) found evidence that conservative (versus liberal) leaning officers were less likely to think that the public understood their jobs but were also less concerned by this perception – as it fit with their expectations of more distant police-citizen relations. Such findings raise the possibility that the different attribution-response patterns discovered in this study may be driven by ideological differences in officers' expectations, which are further reinforced in their daily interactions with the public. Further research examining the role that political ideology plays, as well as other potential antecedents of officers' behavior, would be valuable.

Finally, the generalizability of the findings to other street-level bureaucrats deserves further attention. Policing provides a strong context in which to examine stakeholder critique and bureaucratic encounters. As a uniformed profession, police are highly recognizable to the public and have a strong professional identity (Bayerl et al., 2018). In addition, they are subject to potent critique and scrutiny (Nix & Pickett, 2017). Yet, at the same time, the police share many characteristics with other public sector organizations. Indeed, the negative image and constant critique of street-level bureaucrats has been witnessed across the public sector (Marvel, 2016; Rölle, 2017), while "many writers in public administration have recognized the tendency of public organizations to buffer themselves against the outside world…and resist changes that are forced by outsiders" (Streib, 1992, 23). As such, the attributional behavior and responses of officers may be expected to resonate with other public sector workers. Nevertheless, future research would be useful in order to understand the applicability of the findings to other public administration contexts.

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