

Legal language affects how police officers are judged

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In a diverse society, attitudes and perspectives on police and policing vary based on lived experiences.

Research by [social psychology](#) doctoral student Mikaela Spruill and her adviser, Neil Lewis Jr., assistant professor of communication, revealed that referring to [police](#) using the legal phrase "objectively reasonable"

puts the officer in a more favorable light, regardless of race.

Spruill and Lewis are co-authors of "Legal Descriptions of Police Officers Affect How Citizens Judge Them," which published March 18 in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

In trying to better understand the legal landscape, Spruill and Lewis came across a podcast about the Supreme Court, and an episode talking about the objective reasonableness standard that is applied in court proceedings about police use of force.

"We were both really intrigued," said Spruill. "We both wondered how this legal standard may be having [psychological effects](#) that are shaping the way people are coming to these decisions."

It's a standard that has been in place for decades—and that's been in the news recently due to several high-profile police killings. But little research has been done on how the [language](#) used in the standard affects lay people's judgments of police officers—particularly those who make up American juries.

For their studies, Spruill and Lewis ran survey experiments with nearly 2,000 jury-eligible Americans, examining the dual influences of social stratification and legal language on how Americans form judgments of [police officers](#).

In their first study, they recruited 968 online participants and asked them to describe the actions that come to mind when imagining: a police officer (control group); an "average" police officer; or an "objectively reasonable" [police officer](#). Next, participants were asked to rate the officer along dimensions of "competence" and "warmth," using perception traits from the 1999 Stereotype Content Model.

One result stood out, Spruill said: The use of the term "objectively reasonable" was related to significantly less negative officer descriptions, compared with participants in the control group. "We started to understand that there's something happening here," she said, "where this legal language is seemingly a very powerful kind of frame."

For their second study, Spruill and Lewis recruited a nearly equal number of Black (454) and white (463) participants, who were given the same materials and procedures but assigned to one of two conditions: "average" officer, and "objectively reasonable" officer.

Again, participants in the latter condition used fewer negative descriptors than those in the former group.

"In experiments like this, where it's a really small tweak in language, you usually don't get big shifts like this," Lewis said. "That this language has such a powerful effect on the way people are judging these officers was quite striking to us."

More information: Mikaela Spruill et al, Legal descriptions of police officers affect how citizens judge them, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104306](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104306)

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