



A comparison of the stereotypes that police and members of non-governmental organisations have of missing people

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ABSTRACT

Schema theories predict that stereotypes are influenced by experience. There is currently a lack of research to support this. The study aimed to examine and compare the stereotypes of missing people held by two groups, police and members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who have different experiences with missing persons. The study also investigated whether police have a 'streetwise' stereotype of children who repeatedly go missing, as hypothesized by Newiss (2003). Fifty seven police and 22 NGO participants completed an 'attribute rating' questionnaire, which measured the strength of attributes contained in missing person stereotypes. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to compare the police's and members of NGOs' stereotypes. 'Streetwise' was found to be part of the police stereotype of children that repeatedly go missing, and a significant difference was identified between the content of police and members of NGOs' stereotypes. The study provides support for Newiss' (2003) previously untested hypothesis. Although the study is unable to confirm schema theories' hypothesis that experience influences stereotypes, as the direction of the relationship may be vice versa; it indicates a relationship between experience and stereotypes and succeeds in exploring the under-researched area of stereotype development. Future research should begin to challenge any negative stereotypes of missing people. It should also examine whether encouraging certain experiences, for example, through the provision of resources to allow police to conduct return interviews with missing people, can develop more useful stereotypes.

KEY WORDS:	STEREOTYPES	SCHEMAS	MISSING PEOPLE	POLICE	NGOS
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Introduction

Defining the term 'stereotype' is not a straightforward task as there is contestation about whether stereotypes are cultural and therefore shared by whole societies, or individually developed and held. Perspectives also differ in whether stereotypes have to contain negative content (McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears, 2002). However, a relatively neutral definition describes stereotypes as cognitive structures, consisting of a set of beliefs about the attributes of a group of people (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Research has supported this value-neutral definition by identifying positive attributes contained in particular stereotypes: for example, a stereotype of gay males may contain the attribute of creativity and a stereotype of Asians may include intelligence (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Jackson & Sullivan, 1989).

Fiske and Taylor (1994) describe stereotypes as a form of schema: cognitive structures containing readily available knowledge, for example, about behaviours, emotions and social categories. According to schema theories, incoming data is processed in a top down fashion, which involves schemas and stereotypes providing higher level knowledge that acts as a framework for perception. Rather than the world being analysed in terms of collections of individual attributes, stereotypes provide a more conceptual and organised interpretation of objects, people and events (Abelson, 1981).

Schema theories hypothesise that schemas and stereotypes are a product of culture, socialisation, observation and interaction with social groups (Schneider, 2004). Variation occurs in the nature and strength of schemas as a result of different cultural and social experiences (Bem, 1981). For example, people with differing levels or forms of exposure to a certain group will acquire contrasting knowledge and therefore, develop different schemas of the group. Thus, schemas and stereotypes about some targets will be quite impoverished due to a lack of relevant information available. However, others will be more extensive due to plenty of experience with and knowledge assimilated about such groups (Schneider 2004). This highlights the integral role of experience in the development of stereotypes.

Most of the research supporting schema theories comes from priming studies (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996; Devine, 1989). Priming studies involve either consciously or subliminally exposing a person to stimuli, often scrambled sentences of words that are consistent with a specific schema or stereotype such as a social group. If the exposure results in schema or stereotype-related attitudes and behaviours, this suggests that schemas and stereotypes have an automatic influence over information processing and thus, provides evidence of their existence (Kawakami, Dovidio & Dijksterhuis, 2003). However, McVee, Dunsmore and Gavelek (2005) argue that scrambled sentences focus on a very specific and artificial comprehensive process and therefore, may not be able to account for the more complex schemas and stereotypes that are activated by stimuli in real world contexts. Therefore, priming studies are questionable in terms of their generalisation to less controlled environments, limiting the evidence they provide for schema theories. McVee et al. also acknowledge that priming

studies tend to focus on the activation of schemas and stereotypes, rather than exploring their origins and development. Therefore, more research is required to test schema theories, and especially their hypothesis that stereotype development is influenced by the acquisition and availability of knowledge. This could potentially be achieved by exploring the stereotypes which staff from the police and non-governmental organisations¹ (NGOs) have of 'missing people'; as the two groups have diverse experiences with people that are reported missing (Cummings, 2009; Islington Council Services, 2009; Association of Chief Police Officers, 2005; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 1999).

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) (2005) defines missing people as anybody whose whereabouts are unknown and wellbeing is uncertain. This can include, for example, children that have been abducted by parents or strangers, children and adults that have felt forced to leave home, illegal immigrants that are trying to flee from authorities and dementia patients that have wandered from care homes (Missing People, 2007). The charity Missing People predict that the total number of missing person reports each year is likely to fall between 210,000 and 230,000. As the police have the responsibility of locating missing persons, this figure demonstrates the enormous volume of cases that police have to deal with - a serious issue that takes up many resources and much time (Newiss, 1999).

Other organisations that are involved in finding or supporting people that go missing include the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA), part of which is the Missing Persons Bureau (MPB). The MPB's role is to provide operational support to police investigations, and to improve the effectiveness of missing related services. This is achieved through analysing trends and patterns in disappearances across the UK, and by overseeing the development of national policy in this area (NPIA, 2010). Furthermore, there are numerous NGOs that offer support to the families of missing people, and provide services for adults and children that have chosen to leave home or that have returned from going missing. These include the charity Missing People and the English Coalition for Young Runaways. There are also NGOs that do not work directly with missing persons, but support the sorts of people that are vulnerable to going missing. For example, 'Safe and Sound', which works with sexually abused children, and drug and alcohol centres (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade, 2003).

The fundamental role of the police in missing person cases is to locate missing people (ACPO, 2005). ACPO recommend that police also conduct interviews with persons who have returned from going missing, in order to understand issues in their lives that could explain the episode and to try to reduce the likelihood of the incident recurring. However, the limited time and resources police have to locate an enormous number of missing people

¹ Non-governmental organisations are groups and projects largely or entirely independent of government involvement, for example charities (Edwards & Hulme, 1995).

means return interviews are not currently being conducted routinely (MPB, personal communication, October, 2008). The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009) present some exceptional examples of good practice, where police have tried to improve their understanding of why people go missing. For example, a team of police officers, social workers and voluntary sector workers in Plymouth visit young people that repeatedly run away from home; the aim being to build positive relationships with the youths and to try to identify reasons why the children run away. However, such projects appear to be more reflective of the sorts of relationships that NGOs typically have with people that go missing compared to the police.

Staff from NGOs tend to have the work remit and time to support people that go missing. For example, the charity Missing People provide a crisis-support helpline, through which people that have left home or care can talk to staff about their concerns and experiences (Cummings, 2009). The charity Barnardo's also run the Young Women's Service, which gives female runaways the opportunity to talk to someone about their reasons for going missing (Islington Council Services, 2009).

Therefore, there is an evidential difference between the sorts of experiences members of NGOs have with missing people compared with police officers. Whilst members of NGOs tend to provide support such as listening to the issues of missing people, the police have demanding workloads that challenge the time they can even afford to conduct return interviews (MPB, personal communication, October, 2008). Based on schema theories, this would suggest that police and members of NGOs may have developed different stereotypes of missing people as a result of their differential experiences.

Moving on to examining stereotypes in more depth, notions of error and bias have been the focus of most classical research and literature in the field of stereotypes. Stereotypes have received negative publicity on account of being inaccurate; viewed as often developing from relatively little or biased experience with the social group to which they refer (Schneider, 1996). Another associated problem is that stereotypes involve taking mental shortcuts by forming generalizations about the features of groups. This can result in other information, including that about differences between individuals within groups, being overlooked (Fiske, 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

A risk of using potentially inaccurate and generalised stereotypes is that they have been linked to prejudice (Hamilton & Rose, 1980), which are negative and quite possibly harmful attitudes or behaviours towards a social group (Gardner, 1994). Halbert (1997) revealed that gym users exhibited prejudiced attitudes and behaviour, such as name calling, towards female boxers. This was because they perceived female boxers as lacking attributes considered to be necessary for boxing, such as strength and aggression; this belief being influenced by a stereotype of women as being weak and submissive. Despite their role to protect society, police are not

immune to stereotyping. Sollund (2006), for example, discovered that police were prejudiced towards black men, targeting them in 'stop and search' exercises due to a stereotype of ethnic minority males being involved with crime. Such findings demonstrate the potentially negative consequences of holding stereotypes.

More recently, research has shifted from just measuring the negative content of stereotypes to exploring their resource preserving value. Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen (1994) demonstrated that impression formation becomes simpler through the subliminal activation of stereotypes. Stereotypes achieve this by making mental shortcuts in information processing, which reduces the time and energy required to make decisions and form impressions. Considering the majority of human interactions are considered to be relatively trivial, stereotypes appear to provide an efficient and functional means of processing such information (Schneider, 2004). According to Allport (1954) stereotypes therefore, have evolutionary value by allowing humans to consume the high capacity of data that is received through experience (cited in McGarty, 1999). The process of stereotyping is thus central to developing a manageable and organised perception of the world (Bargh, 1999).

Research demonstrating the functionality of stereotypes (Macrae et al, 1994) indicates that they may have the potential to be useful in missing person investigations. In fact, several studies have already been conducted to try and identify patterns in the locations people of a certain demographic profile have gone missing from, and whether and where they have been found (Gibb & Woolnough, 2007; Perkins, Roberts & Feeney, 2004). The aim is to use such schemas or stereotypic associations to pinpoint places a person may be found; which has the potential to help guide decision-making in investigations. The studies are limited, as their use of data from specific police force areas makes the findings difficult to generalise to the rest of the UK. However, they, along with research exploring the usefulness of stereotypes, indicate the possibility of using representative stereotypes of missing people to potentially achieve time-saving benefits in missing person investigations. This would be of particular value to police, as fast and rational responses are crucial in missing person cases (Chen et al., 2002; Dean, Fahsing & Gottschalk, 2006).

Given the overwhelming number of missing people reported, it is perhaps unsurprising that concerns have arisen regarding mental shortcuts that police may be using to prioritise and guide their responses to cases. A significant proportion of missing person reports involve children that repeatedly go missing, and a majority of these involve children from residential care homes (Rees & Lee, 2005). Newiss (1999) identifies the frustration these cases create for police who can be negatively influenced, coming to view them as simply administrative exercises rather than demanding a full enquiry. The police predict the young people will return safely, but will continue to persist in runaway behaviour; and several forces have openly admitted to delayed responses to such cases.

Newiss (2003) hypothesizes that police have a stereotype of young people who repeatedly go missing as being 'streetwise'. Lankenau, Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt and Gwadz (2005) define 'streetwise' as knowing where to acquire resources, whom to trust and being aware of the culture and social structure in an environment. This perception can have negative consequences, such as influencing police into thinking that such disappearances are not serious or out of the ordinary; resulting in police not responding to cases as urgently as they should (Newiss). Newiss (1999; 2003) suggests there would be value to identifying: the content of police stereotypes of missing persons, the accuracy of the stereotypes, and the relationship between police stereotypes and responses to cases. There have not yet been any studies measuring the content of police stereotypes of missing persons (Missing People, 2007).

Research measuring stereotypes tends to perceive them as multidimensional, representing varying aspects of a social category's characteristics including personality, behavioural and physical attributes (Stangor & Lange, 1994). The 'content' of stereotypes refers to the types of attributes included and the 'strength' is the degree to which these attributes are perceived as being characteristic (Madon, 1997).

Schneider (2004) describes various procedures that measure the content and strength of stereotypes. The techniques of 'adjective check listing' and 'rating scales' involve participants selecting attributes from a list which they perceive to be representative of the members of a particular social group; providing an indication of the stereotype's content. These techniques allow for a broad range of attributes to be included in the lists and tested. 'Rating scales' also involve participants rating attributes according to their perceived representativeness, allowing the strength of the stereotypes to be examined (Madon, 1997). However, a limitation of these techniques is that the investigator is responsible for generating the lists of attributes, which means there is a risk that attributes contained in participants' stereotypes may not be included in the lists (Stangor & Lange, 1994). In contrast, a 'free response' technique involves participants spontaneously listing attributes they associate with a particular group. This technique ensures no attributes are excluded by the investigator; however, it is possible that participants may fail to recall all attributes they associate with a social group (Madon).

Madon (1997), exploring the content of stereotypes relating to homosexual males, therefore used a combined approach involving several of the above techniques. Firstly, a preliminary free response technique was used, which involved participants generating attributes associated with male homosexuals. The attributes formed an adjective checklist, from which participants then selected what they considered most characteristic of homosexual males. According to Stangor and Lange (1994), using a combined procedure has the advantage of maximising the strengths of individual procedures by minimising any weaknesses, such as investigator bias. Therefore, using such an approach to measure stereotypes may be preferable.

The current study

Aim

To compare the content of police stereotypes with members of NGOs' stereotypes of different types of missing people.

Hypotheses

1. A 'streetwise' attribute will be part of the police stereotype of children who repeatedly go missing.
2. There will be a significant difference in the content of the police stereotypes compared to the members of NGOs' stereotypes of missing people.

Rationale

Hypothesis 1 tests Newiss' (2003), at present unsupported, hypothesis that police stereotype young people that repeatedly go missing as 'streetwise'. In order to challenge potentially problematic stereotypes of missing people and to find ways of making them more representative and functional, the contents of the stereotypes must first be identified. The current study intends to commence this process.

Hypothesis 2 tests schema theories which state that different experiences with a social group will result in the development of different stereotypes. Assuming that police have differential experiences with missing persons to members of NGOs, the study should either provide support for, or challenge schema theories.

Method

A combined approach, similar to that taken by Madon (1997) was used. This involved several preliminary procedures which were required in order to design an 'attribute rating' questionnaire for the main study.

Preliminary procedures

Semi-structured focus groups

Two semi-structured focus groups were conducted with six and five participants respectively. Participants were recruited by convenience sampling and included police officers and staff from the MPB and Missing People charity. Participants were asked to read a briefing note and to sign a consent form before taking part. The briefing note explained what participation involved, how responses were going to be used and the purpose of the study. The focus groups were audio recorded.

The agenda involved participants generating different 'types' of missing persons. Types include persons of different genders, ages and who have gone missing under different circumstances. Participants discussed associations they make with these types, their experiences with them and

differences and similarities between the types. Different ways the missing person types could be categorised, and what factors should be considered during this process were also discussed (see Appendix 2 for focus group schedule). Participants received a de-briefing document after taking part, which contained in-depth information about the study, its aims and intended purpose. It explained why the term 'stereotyping' was not used in any materials participants received and assured participants that they could withdraw their contribution to the focus group from the study if desired.

In the focus groups, participants particularly raised concerns about the associations that practitioners make with three of the missing person types discussed (see Appendix 3 for relevant transcripts). Thus, these were selected by the researcher for further exploration by being included in the preliminary 'free response' and 'attribute rating' questionnaires.

Preliminary 'free response' questionnaire

Participants were recruited by convenience sampling and included 46 professionals working in the field of missing persons, 32 police and 14 staff or volunteers from NGOs; all of whom completed a preliminary 'free response' questionnaire (see Appendix 4 for 'free response' questionnaire). Participants were asked to read a briefing note before taking part, which explained what participation involved, how responses were going to be used and the purpose of the study. The note also informed them that by completing the questionnaire, they would be automatically consenting to participation.

The three missing person types selected from the focus group were presented on the questionnaire. Participants were asked to generate three personal attributes for each type which they considered to be particularly characteristic of the members of the type. Participants were sent a de-briefing document after completing the questionnaire. It contained in-depth information about the study, its aims and intended purpose. It explained why the term 'stereotyping' was not used in any materials participants received and assured participants that they could withdraw their questionnaire from the study if desired.

The questionnaires were then analysed by the researcher and four MPB staff, who produced ten to thirteen over-arching attributes for each of the missing person types, to represent all of the individual attributes. This was done by grouping synonyms and attributes with similar meanings together.

An inter-rater reliability test was conducted to examine whether different people perceived the over-arching attributes to represent the same individual attributes. This involved comparing the researcher's and two MPB staffs' allocation of individual attributes to the over-arching attributes. There was a low percentage correspondence between the allocations (less than 50%), indicating that the meanings of the over-arching attributes were interpreted differently. Consequently, the over-arching attributes were included on the 'attribute rating' questionnaire with brief definitions of their

meanings, to try to ensure participants interpreted attributes the way the researcher intended (see Appendix 5 for 'attribute rating' questionnaire).

Main procedure

Participants

Seventy nine professionals working in the field of missing persons participated. Of these, 57 were police officers or police civilian staff who had the opportunity to be involved in the investigation of missing person cases. Twenty two were employees and volunteers working for NGOs 'in the field' of missing people or 'linked to the field' of missing people. Working 'in the field' included those working directly with people who go missing or in related areas such as in policy or research, rather than in unrelated administrative or financial jobs. NGOs 'linked to the field' but who do not work directly with missing people were included if their roles involved working with the types of people that literature indicate are vulnerable to going missing, such as abused children and people with alcohol issues (Biehal et al., 2003).

Due to the specialised nature of this field, and the potential benefits of gaining responses from those with direct relevant experiences with missing people, participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Associates of the MPB from police forces and NGOs were asked to forward a generic recruitment email to staff at their organisations whose job roles involved working in, or were linked to, missing people. The MPB has a database of police officer associates for all UK forces, twelve of whom were contacted and agreed to forward the email to police officers and staff. MPB staff suggested associates they have in NGOs to the researcher, nine of whom were contacted and seven agreed to forward the email to staff. The remaining two associates did not feel that staff or volunteers at their organisations had sufficient experience with missing people to be able to participate. The internet was also used to identify eight NGOs that were contacted, all of whom agreed to forward the email to staff. The recruitment email gave recipients the opportunity to complete an attached, 'attribute rating' questionnaire.

Forty three of the participants were male and 36 were female. Ages ranged from 22 to 59 years with a median of 41 years. Most had been working at their current organisation for over a year (93.7%), the majority for over five years (68.4%) and a significant proportion for over 21 years (25.3%). The median length of time spent working at their current organisation was higher for police (16 to 20 years) than NGO participants (one to five years).

Materials

An 'attribute rating' questionnaire was employed (see Appendix 5 for 'attribute rating' questionnaire). The design of the questionnaire was loosely based around that used by Madon (1997) to explore the content and strength of gay male stereotypes. The first part of the questionnaire asked for demographic information including gender, age, occupation (police or

member of an NGO) and years experience at current organisation. The second part of the questionnaire presented the three missing person types selected from the preliminary focus groups:

- 'Repeat runaways': Children who go missing repeatedly from residential or foster care.
- 'Hospital absentees': Adults who are missing as a result of discharging themselves from hospitals.
- 'Illegal immigrants': Illegal immigrants reported as missing because they have fled from British authorities.

The questionnaire also presented personal attributes which included characteristics of personality, emotion, behaviour and physical appearance that corresponded with the missing person types. The attributes were generated by the preliminary questionnaire. Underneath 'repeat runaways' were its 12 corresponding attributes ('detached', 'abused', 'worried', 'unstimulated', 'vulnerable', 'aggressive', 'streetwise', 'narcissistic/ self centred', 'childlike', 'uninhibited', 'rebellious/ disobedient' and 'nuisance'). Underneath 'hospital absentees' were its ten corresponding attributes ('fearful/ vulnerable', 'ill', 'uncooperative', 'alcohol or drugs dependent', 'capable/ decisive', 'determined', 'irresponsible', 'narcissistic/ self centred', 'nuisance' and 'irrational/ unstable'). Underneath 'illegal immigrants' were its 13 corresponding attributes ('vulnerable/ unprotected', 'fearful/ afraid', 'reckless', 'self assured/ strength of character', 'detached', 'alone', 'cynical/ sceptical', 'foreign', 'uncooperative', 'narcissistic/ self centred', 'poverty', 'streetwise' and 'criminal tendencies'). Alongside each attribute was a brief definition of its meaning to try to ensure they were interpreted and understood by participants in the way intended by the researcher.

To help participants to complete the rating questions, an example of an answered question was presented on the questionnaire. A social group unrelated to missing persons, Oxford University students, was used with corresponding attributes that had already been rated on the scale of one to five: intelligent, self disciplined and lazy.

The questionnaire also presented the researcher's contact details for requesting more information about the study or a copy of the final report.

Design

The study is a between-subjects design, as the independent variable, the occupation of the participant (police or NGO), is mutually exclusive; participants were a member of one or the other group. The attribute ratings generated by participants constitute the dependent variable.

Procedure

Firstly, the questionnaire was piloted by two participants from the MPB, both of whom generated feedback regarding its instructions and layout which was used to produce the final questionnaire design.

The recruitment email that was sent to participants contained the 'attribute rating' questionnaire and a briefing note. Before taking part, participants were asked to read the briefing note which explained what participation involved, how responses were going to be used and the purpose of the study. The note also informed them that by completing the questionnaire, they would be automatically consenting to participation. The term 'stereotyping' was not used in any of these materials due to its negative connotations, which could have triggered participants to give socially desirable answers (Schneider, 2004).

Participants were asked to rate each attribute on the questionnaire on a scale of one to five (one = very uncharacteristic, five = very characteristic) according to how characteristic they perceived it to be of the corresponding missing person type. Participants were asked to select just one rating for each attribute. They were also requested to respond to the questions swiftly based on initial thoughts to avoid deliberation, for example, about which rating would be most socially acceptable.

Participants who returned the questionnaire via email received a reply with a de-briefing document attached. It contained in-depth information about the study, its aims and intended purpose. It explained why the term 'stereotyping' was not used in any materials participants received and assured participants that they could withdraw their questionnaire from the study if desired. The police and NGO associates who forwarded the original recruitment email also made the de-briefing document available to recipients of the recruitment email. This ensured that participants who returned the questionnaires by post and did not provide alternative contact details received the de-briefing document.

Results

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using 'SPSS Version 16'.

If at least 60% of participants rated an attribute a four or five (on the scale of one to five, where five represented very characteristic), this attribute was considered stereotypic. This is based on Madon's (1997) study, where attributes were considered stereotypic if at least 60% of participants rated them 'very' or 'somewhat' characteristic.

Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVAs) were performed on the data for the three types of missing people. This was to investigate combined and individual differences in attribute ratings for police compared with members of NGOs. The independent variable for all the MANOVAs was occupation; police or member of an NGO. Preliminary MANOVA assumption testing was conducted on the data and no serious violations were found for linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices or multicollinearity. The normality assumption could not be tested as the data is ordinal level. Despite not being able to test for normality, the MANOVA was used as there was no nonparametric

alternative that could have been employed, although this may have limited the strength of the statistical analysis. In the current study, mean, rather than median averages, which are typically reported for ordinal level data, are reported as a measure of central tendency. This is because the MANOVA compares the mean rather than the median in its analysis.

Unrated questionnaires

One police participant did not rate any attributes for 'illegal immigrants'. Two NGO participants did not rate any attributes for 'hospital absentees' or 'illegal immigrants'. Responses indicated that both of these NGO participants felt insufficiently knowledgeable as they instead, worked at a project with sexually abused children and with young people at a YMCA.

Six police participants and three NGO participants did not rate at least one of the attributes for missing person types they had otherwise rated. Due to the restrictions of the MANOVA, these sections of the questionnaire had to be omitted from the analyses. This did not substantially alter the sample sizes, with 52 police and 22 NGO participants for 'repeat runaways', 56 police and 19 NGO participants for 'hospital absentees' and 55 police and 18 NGO participants for 'illegal immigrants'. A police participant who did not rate the attribute 'nuisance' for 'repeat runaways' or 'hospital absentees' did not feel comfortable with the term and believed that the corresponding definition was poorly worded. No other participants provided reasons for not rating attributes; however, it may have been due to a lack of knowledge about or experience with the type of missing person. Frequencies of ratings that are reported just include those from the questionnaire sections that were able to be analysed by the MANOVA. This was done to try to maintain consistency amongst the results being reported.

Descriptive results

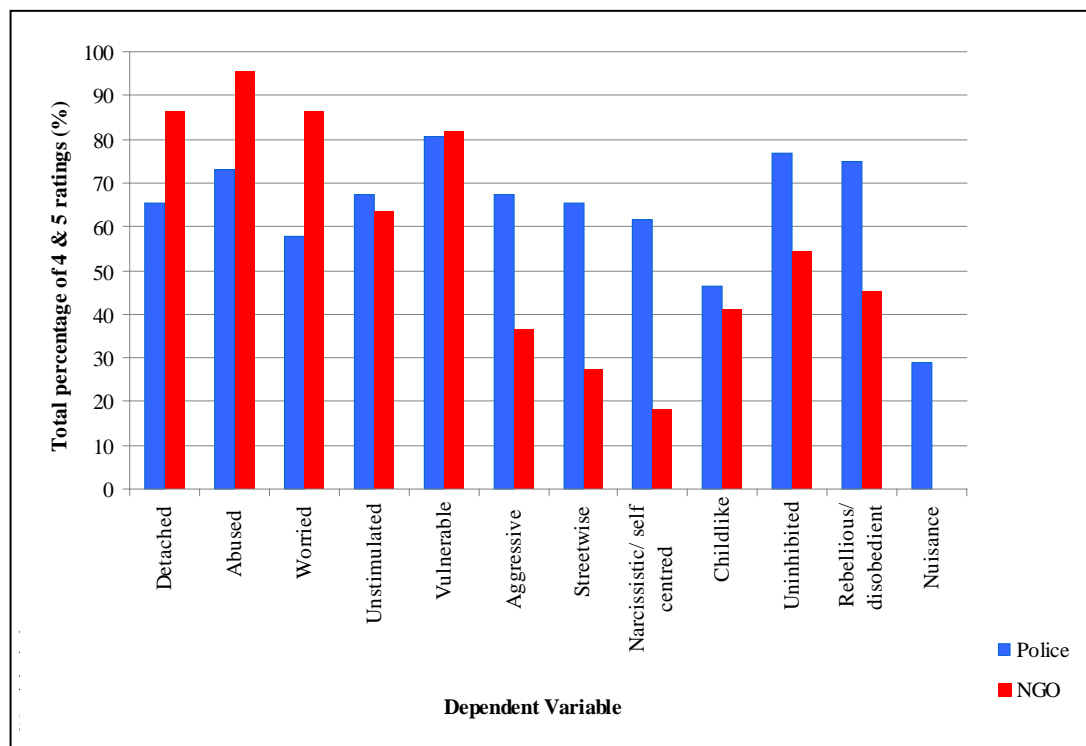


Figure 1: Total percentage of 4 and 5 ratings on dependent variables (attributes) associated with ‘Children who go missing repeatedly from residential or foster care’, for police compared with NGO participants

‘Streetwise’ was found to be part of the police’s stereotype of ‘repeat runaways’ (65.4% rated it a 4 or 5) but not the NGO participants’ stereotype (see Figure 1). The police also considered ‘vulnerable’ (80.7%²), ‘abused’ (73.1%²), ‘unstimulated’ (67.3%²) and ‘detached’ (65.4%²) to be stereotypic of ‘repeat runaways’, as did NGO participants (‘vulnerable’ = 81.8%², ‘abused’ = 95.4%², ‘unstimulated’ = 63.6%² and ‘detached’ = 86.4%²). Police considered ‘uninhibited’ (76.9%²), ‘narcissistic/ self centred’ (61.5%²), ‘aggressive’ (67.4%²), and ‘rebellious/ disobedient’ (75%²) to be stereotypic, though NGO participants did not. NGO participants considered ‘worried’ to be stereotypic of ‘repeat runaways’ (86.3%²), though the police did not. ‘Nuisance’ was not considered stereotypic by police or NGO participants, with no NGO participants rating it a 4 or 5. However, 28.9% of the police still rated it a 4 or 5.

² The percentage of 4 and 5 ratings.

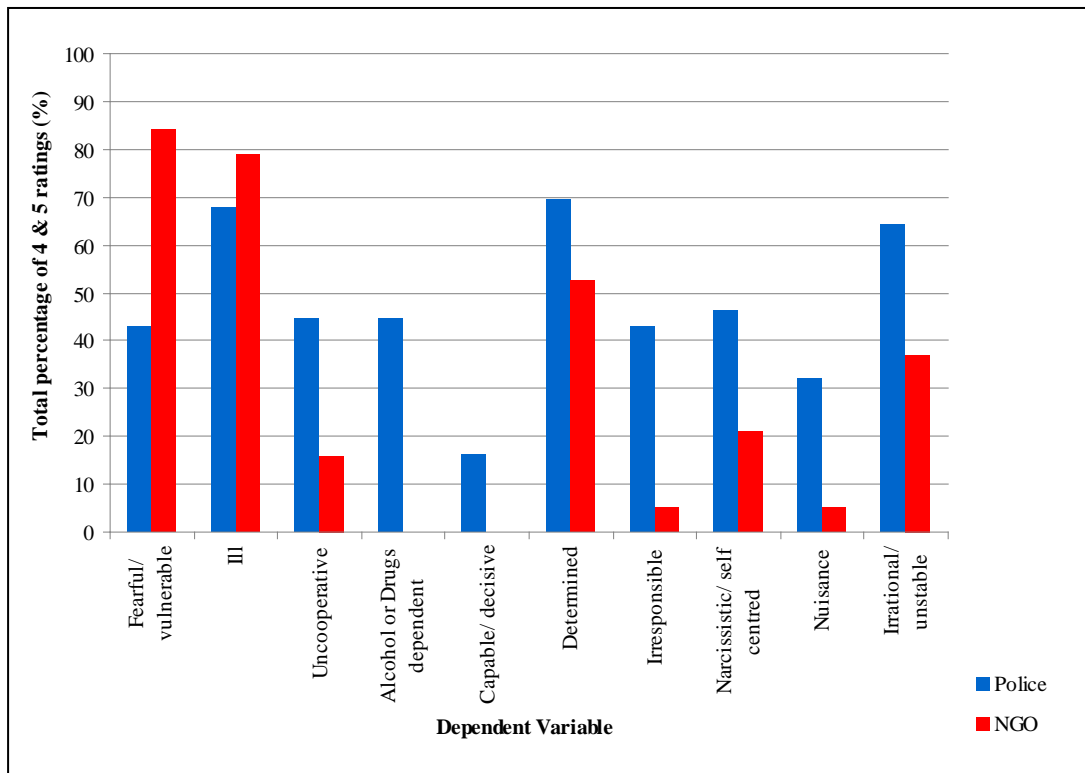


Figure 2: Total percentage of 4 and 5 ratings on dependent variables (attributes) associated with ‘Adults who are missing as a result of discharging themselves from hospitals’, for police compared with NGO participants

‘Ill’ was considered to be stereotypic of ‘hospital absentees’ by the NGO participants (78.9%²) and the police (67.8%²) (see Figure 2). The police considered ‘determined’ (69.7%²) and ‘irrational/ unstable’ (64.2%²) to be stereotypic, however NGO participants did not. NGO participants considered ‘fearful/ vulnerable’ (84.2%²) to be stereotypic, though police did not.

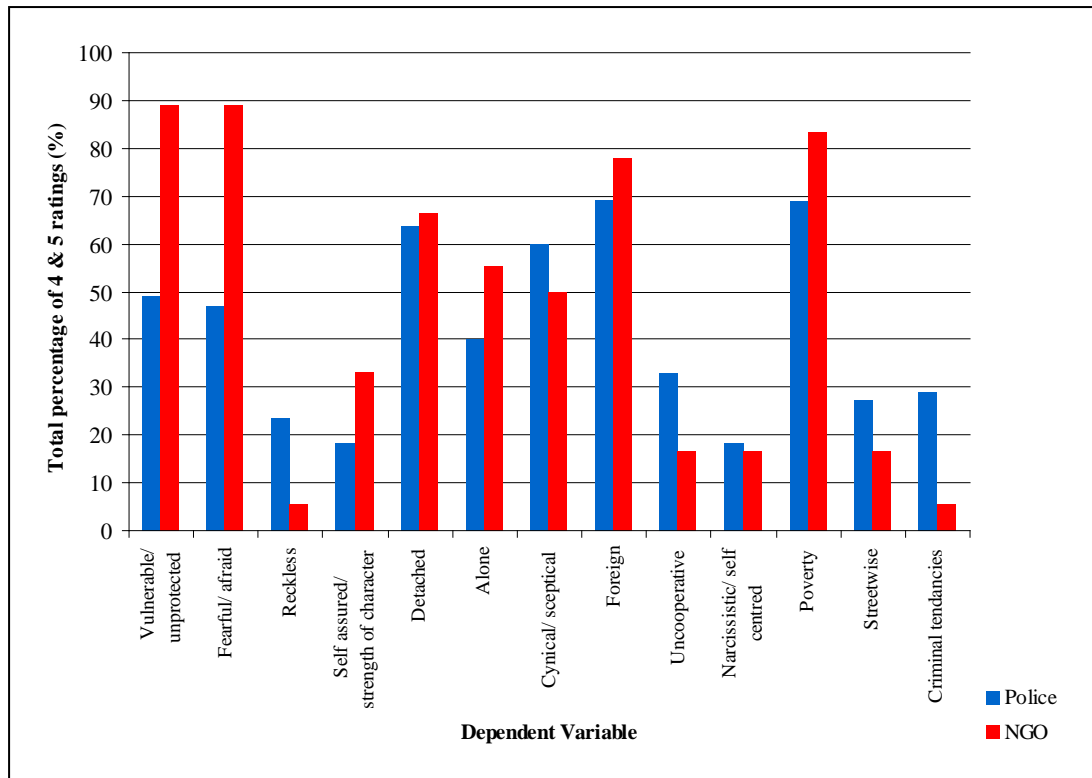


Figure 3: Total percentage of 4 and 5 ratings on dependent variables (attributes) associated with ‘Illegal immigrants reported missing because they have fled from British authorities’, for police compared with NGO participants

The police considered ‘detached’ (63.6%²), ‘poverty’ (69%²) and ‘foreign’ (69.1%²) to be stereotypic of ‘illegal immigrants’, as did NGO participants (detached = 66.6%², poverty = 83.3%² and foreign = 77.7%²) (see Figure 3). ‘Cynical/ sceptical’ was considered stereotypic by the police (60%²), but not by NGO participants. NGO participants considered ‘fearful/ afraid’ (88.9%²) and ‘vulnerable/ unprotected’ (88.9%²) to be stereotypic, but the police did not.

Statistical results

For all three missing person types, there was a significant difference between occupation on the combined dependent variables (attributes) for the police compared with NGO participants: ‘repeat runaways’ ($F(12, 61) = 3.23, p < 0.05$); ‘hospital absentees’ ($F(10, 64) = 3.36, p < 0.05$); and ‘illegal immigrants’ ($F(13, 59) = 2.73, p < 0.05$).

Table 1
Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), and mean and standard deviation values for dependent variables (attributes) associated with ‘Children who go missing repeatedly from residential or foster care’

Dependent Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>df</i> <i>error</i>	<i>F</i>	Occupation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Detached	1	72	5.06	Police	3.71	0.94
				NGO	4.22	0.81
Abused	1	72	4.87	Police	3.89	0.94
				NGO	4.36	0.58
Worried*	1	72	11.13	Police	3.71	1.00
				NGO	4.50	0.74
Unstimulated	1	72	0.00	Police	3.94	0.83
				NGO	3.96	0.84
Vulnerable	1	72	0.26	Police	4.21	0.85
				NGO	4.32	0.78
Aggressive	1	72	5.05	Police	3.81	0.86
				NGO	3.32	0.84
Streetwise*	1	72	9.88	Police	3.81	0.89
				NGO	3.09	0.92
Narcissistic ³ *	1	72	16.34	Police	3.73	1.01
				NGO	2.73	0.88
Childlike	1	72	0.01	Police	3.39	0.84
				NGO	3.36	1.05
Uninhibited	1	72	2.87	Police	3.96	0.86
				NGO	3.59	0.85
Rebellious/disobedient	1	72	7.16	Police	4.06	0.80
				NGO	3.50	0.86
Nuisance*	1	72	18.68	Police	3.02	1.13
				NGO	1.86	0.83

Note: *df* = Degrees of freedom; *df error* = Degrees of freedom error; *F* = Probability distribution; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

*Statistically significant differences at the $p < 0.004$ level

³Narcissistic/ self centred

There was a statistically significant difference for 'worried' ($F(1, 72) = 11.13$, $p < 0.004$), with a higher mean ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.74$) for NGO participants than for the police ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.00$) (see Table 1). 'Streetwise' reached a significant difference ($F(1, 72) = 9.88$, $p < 0.004$), with a higher mean for the police ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.89$) than NGO participants ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.92$). 'Narcissistic/ self centred' reached a significant difference ($F(1, 72) = 16.34$, $p < 0.004$), with a higher mean for the police ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.01$) than NGO participants ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.88$). 'Nuisance' reached a significantly higher difference for the police compared with NGO participants ($F(1, 72) = 18.68$, $p < 0.004$). 'Nuisance' was also the attribute with the lowest mean for the police ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.13$) and NGO participants ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.83$).

Table 2
Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), and mean and standard deviation values for dependent variables (attributes) associated with 'Adults who are missing as a result of discharging themselves from hospitals'

Dependent Variable	<i>Df</i>	<i>df error</i>	<i>F</i>	Occupation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Fearful/vulnerable	1	73	4.87	Police	3.38	1.18
				NGO	4.00	0.58
Ill	1	73	1.11	Police	3.80	0.94
				NGO	4.05	0.71
Uncooperative	1	73	3.18	Police	3.34	0.96
				NGO	2.90	0.88
A or D dependent ⁴	1	73	9.00	Police	3.46	1.06
				NGO	2.68	0.67
Capable/decisive	1	73	0.01	Police	2.63	0.93
				NGO	2.63	0.60
Determined	1	73	2.55	Police	3.79	0.82
				NGO	3.42	0.96

Irresponsible*	1	73	17.68	Police	3.36	0.90
				NGO	2.37	0.83
Narcissistic ⁵ *	1	73	9.84	Police	3.46	0.96
				NGO	2.68	0.89
Nuisance*	1	73	16.72	Police	3.05	1.07
				NGO	1.95	0.85
Irrational/unstable	1	73	3.16	Police	3.70	0.95
				NGO	3.26	0.81

Note: *df* = Degrees of freedom; *df error* = Degrees of freedom error; *F* = Probability distribution; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

*Statistically significant differences at the $p < 0.003$ level

⁴Alcohol or drugs dependent

⁵Narcissistic/ self centred

'Irresponsible' ($F(1, 73) = 17.68, p < 0.003$), 'narcissistic/ self centred' ($F(1, 73) = 9.84, p < 0.003$) and 'nuisance' ($F(1, 73) = 16.72, p < 0.003$) all reached a significant difference for 'hospital absentees' (see Table 2). The mean was higher for the police's ratings for 'irresponsible' ($M = 3.36, SD = 0.90$), 'narcissistic/ self centred' ($M = 3.46, SD = 0.96$) and 'nuisance' ($M = 3.05, SD = 1.07$) than the NGO participants' ratings ('irresponsible' $M = 2.37, SD = 0.83$, 'narcissistic/ self centred' $M = 2.68, SD = 0.89$ and 'nuisance' $M = 1.95, SD = 0.85$).

Table 3
Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), and mean and standard deviation values for dependent variables (attributes) associated with ‘Illegal immigrants reported missing because they have fled from British authorities’

Dependent Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>df error</i>	<i>F</i>	Occupation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Vulnerable/Unprotected*	1	71	12.61	Police	3.36	1.19
				NGO	4.44	0.86
Fearful/afraid*	1	71	18.12	Police	3.46	0.90
				NGO	4.44	0.70
Reckless	1	71	1.85	Police	3.00	0.92
				NGO	2.67	0.84
Self assured ⁶	1	71	0.10	Police	2.96	0.82
				NGO	2.89	1.02
Detached	1	71	0.01	Police	3.93	0.90
				NGO	3.94	0.94
Alone	1	71	4.86	Police	3.35	0.91
				NGO	3.89	0.90
Cynical/sceptical	1	71	0.15	Police	3.76	0.86
				NGO	3.67	1.14
Foreign	1	71	0.20	Police	3.93	1.17
				NGO	4.11	0.76
Uncooperative	1	71	1.53	Police	3.04	1.15
				NGO	2.67	0.91
Narcissistic/self centred	1	71	2.20	Police	2.78	0.96
				NGO	2.39	1.04
Poverty	1	71	1.46	Police	3.89	1.08
				NGO	4.22	0.73

Streetwise	1	71	1.43	Police	2.98	0.99
				NGO	2.67	0.91
Criminal tendencies*	1	71	15.05	Police	3.20	0.85
				NGO	2.28	0.96

Note: *df* = Degrees of freedom; *df error* = Degrees of freedom error; *F* = Probability distribution; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

*Statistically significant differences at the $p < 0.002$ level

⁶Self assured/ strength of character

'Vulnerable/ unprotected' reached a significant difference ($F(1, 71) = 12.61$, $p < 0.002$), with a higher mean for NGO participants ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.86$) than the police ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.19$) for 'illegal immigrants' (see Table 3). 'Fearful/ afraid' reached a significant difference ($F(1, 71) = 18.12$, $p < 0.002$), with a higher mean ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.70$) for NGO participants than the police ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.90$). There was a significant difference for 'criminal tendencies' ($F(1, 71) = 15.05$, $p < 0.002$), with a higher mean ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.85$) for the police than NGO participants ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.96$).

Summary

There were some similarities as well as differences between police and members of NGOs' attribute ratings. In general, the police considered relatively negative and unattractive aspects of personality and behaviour to be significantly more stereotypic; whilst NGO participants considered attributes associated with feelings of fear and anxiety that the missing people may experience, to be more stereotypic. There was a significant difference in the police's and NGO participants' combined attribute ratings for the three missing person types. Notably, the police considered streetwise to be stereotypic of 'repeat runaways' but NGO participants did not.

Discussion

As aimed by the study, it has compared the content of police stereotypes with members of NGOs' stereotypes of different types of missing people. Hypothesis 1 was that a 'streetwise' attribute will be part of the police's stereotype of children who repeatedly go missing. The main findings of the study show that of the police participants, 65.4% rated the attribute 'streetwise' a four or five (on a scale of one to five, where five was considered very characteristic) for 'children who go missing repeatedly from residential or foster care'. If at least 60% of participants rated an attribute a four or five, this attribute was considered stereotypic. Therefore, this

indicates that 'streetwise' was part of the police's stereotypes of children who repeatedly go missing and provides support for hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 was that there will be a significant difference in the content of police's and members of NGOs' stereotypes of missing people. Significant differences were found overall between the police and members of NGOs on combined attribute ratings for all three missing person types. This indicates that there is a significant difference in the content of their stereotypes of missing people; providing support for hypothesis 2.

'Streetwise' was identified as being part of the general police's stereotype of 'children who go missing repeatedly from residential or foster care'. However, whilst 65.4% of police rated it a 4 or 5, this means 34.6% did not; therefore 'streetwise' was not perceived as characteristic by all of the police participants. Thus, this demonstrates partial support for Newiss' (2003) hypothesis that police have a streetwise stereotype of young people that repeatedly go missing.

'Nuisance', defined in the 'attribute rating' questionnaire as 'to be a pain and a waste of time in general', was not found to be part of the general police stereotype of children who repeatedly go missing (see Appendix 5 for 'attribute rating' questionnaire). This was unexpected but encouraging considering the frustration that police express with the investigation of such cases (Newiss, 1999). However, 28.9% of police still rated it a 4 or 5, demonstrating that at least some perceived it to be characteristic. Therefore, this is in line to a degree, with Newiss' (1999) finding that police can be tempted to view such cases as not requiring a full investigation.

'Vulnerable', 'to be an easy target for others to victimise', was also found to be part of the police's stereotype of children who repeatedly go missing. This appears contrary to Newiss' (2003) prediction that police do not perceive such cases to be serious, believing the children will return home safely.

Therefore, with all findings considered, the current study provides some support, though not conclusive, for Newiss' hypotheses.

The study identified a significant difference in the content of police compared to members of NGOs' stereotypes. According to schema theories, the knowledge humans acquire through experience influences the nature and strength of the stereotypes they develop (Schneider, 2004). A consequence of this is that variation will occur between the stereotypes of people with different experiences (Bem, 1981). Assuming that there is a difference in the experiences of police compared to members of NGOs in engaging with missing people (Cummings, 2009; Islington Council Services, 2009; ACPO, 2005; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 1999), the current study's identification of a significant difference between their stereotypes provides some support for schema theories.

Police generally rated the missing people higher on attributes representing negative aspects of personality and behaviour compared to members of NGOs. This appears to be in keeping with the lack of time police have to

conduct return interviews (MPB, personal communication, October, 2008), which may have negatively impacted on their opportunities to gain understanding of the behaviour, experiences and anxieties of people that go missing. Such negative attributes may also be an accurate reflection of the experiences police encounter with missing people. The police are responsible for the investigation of cases (ACPO, 2005). This means that their presence may be more likely to invoke relatively negative behaviours from missing people; particularly those that have chosen to go missing, which is the case for the types of missing people examined in the current study. For example, police may well experience more of the 'rebellious' nature of 'repeat runaways'. On the surface, 'hospital absentees' may be 'uncooperative' and 'irrational' towards police during investigations and due to the characteristic of police work in enforcing law, they may experience the 'criminal tendencies' of 'illegal immigrants' more so than members of NGOs. Police also considered 'determined' to be stereotypic of 'hospital absentees', though the police did not. Whilst this is not necessarily a negative attribute, it is an attribute that police may be more likely to encounter in their experiences, as they deal with persons when they persist in going missing. The perception indicated by some police that 'repeat runaways' and 'hospital absentees' are a 'nuisance' may also reflect their responsibility to search for missing people when they repeatedly go missing, often within very short spaces of time; an understandably frustrating task.

Members of NGOs rated attributes relating to fear and anxiety as more characteristic of missing people than police. This indicates that members of NGOs could have a greater awareness, or are more sensitive to fears and vulnerabilities that missing people may experience. This appears to be in keeping with members of NGOs' experiences with missing persons, which typically involve listening to their concerns and reasons for going missing through support services such as helplines (Cummings, 2009; Islington Council Services, 2009; Missing People, 2007); whilst as mentioned above, the police's opportunity for this sort of engagement is restricted by workload and resourcing limitations (MPB, personal communication, October 2008).

These findings provide further support for schema theories through demonstrating some degree of consistency between the content of police's and members of NGOs' respective stereotypes and their different, perhaps 'biased' experiences with missing people.

A problem with the research that challenges the support it provides for schema theories is its inability to identify the direction of the relationship between experience and stereotype content. The study provides support for a relationship by identifying a significant difference between the stereotypes of groups with different experiences. However, it is unable to identify whether it is experience that is influencing the stereotypes developed, as schema theories hypothesise. An alternative explanation for the findings is that the participants' schemas and the way they stereotype people, influenced them to enter a particular career; the police or NGO work. This would indicate that their stereotypes are influencing experience, rather than

vice versa. Consequently, the study cannot provide absolute support for schema theories' hypothesis that experience influences the development of stereotypes (Bem, 1991; Schneider, 2004).

There are also various potentially confounding variables that were not controlled for, which limit the strength of this study. They were not controlled due to the limited time available. For example, the median length of time the NGO participants had worked at their current organisation (one to five years) was less than for the police sample (16 to 20 years). This may have influenced the way the attributes were rated. If the study were to be repeated, results should investigate whether there is a relationship between length and type of experiences, as well as gender, age and possibly personality type, and the way the attributes are rated. If this had been done in the current study, this would have helped to provide an improved indication of the strength of the relationship between experience and stereotypes.

There are limitations regarding the 'attribute rating' questionnaire used in the study. As the questionnaire relied on self reported attribute ratings, there is a risk that participants may have given socially desirable answers when rating controversial attributes such as 'nuisance' and 'narcissistic'. To try to avoid social desirability effects, the term 'stereotyping', which can be negatively interpreted, was not used in the questionnaires or other materials participants received (Schneider, 2004). Participants were also assured that their identity would remain anonymous throughout the study. Another limitation is that participants with less knowledge about the types of missing people, may have attributed mid values on the scale of one to five as a reflection of their neutral stance. The researcher interpreted a lack of four and five ratings for an attribute as meaning the participants perceived it as uncharacteristic. However, it may actually have represented a lack of knowledge about the corresponding missing person type. Therefore, if the study were to be repeated, providing an alternative option to select for participants who lack a specific opinion should be considered.

An assumption of the Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) is that data shows normal distribution. However, the study analyzed ordinal data in the form of the attribute ratings, which cannot be measured for normality. This would have decreased the statistical power of the analysis by reducing the likelihood of identifying significant findings (Harwell & Gatti, 2001). Therefore, the results need to be treated with some caution in relation to their robustness. Ideally, the study should be repeated with the adequate statistical expertise to be able to transform the ordinal data to continuous data, possibly using an Interval Rating technique, which can then be measured for normality prior to conducting the MANOVA.

The sample sizes in the current study were also unequal, with over double the ratio of police to members of NGOs. As the MANOVA prefers equal sample sizes, this may also have decreased the statistical power of the findings. SPSS did adjust for unequal sample sizes, which should have helped to reduce any negative impact on the validity of the results.

Nevertheless, if the finances were available, incentives could have been used to recruit participants in order to achieve more equal sample sizes. Using incentives to achieve larger samples would also have helped to reduce the impact of any violations of the MANOVA's assumptions (Pallant, 2007).

The study is innovative as it is the first to provide support for Newiss' (2003) hypothesis that police have a streetwise stereotype of young people that repeatedly go missing. The study also provides support for a relationship between experience and stereotypes, thus it successfully explores the currently under researched area of stereotype development (McVee et al., 2005).

The study used a combination of techniques to measure stereotypes. Stangor and Lange (1994) describe how this helps to strengthen individual procedures by minimising any weaknesses. A preliminary questionnaire was used to generate attributes which avoided these being influenced by the interviewer's agenda. Using an attribute rating questionnaire also helped to validate the findings of the preliminary questionnaire. This therefore, demonstrates the robustness and strength of the procedure employed.

By providing some support for Newiss' (2003) previously untested hypothesis that police have a streetwise stereotype of young people that repeatedly go missing, the current study offers a foundation for future research to investigate the effects of the stereotype. Research should test Newiss' prediction that the stereotype misleads police to respond to cases less urgently than they potentially should.

The findings of the study also encourage more research, possibly qualitative, to explore what the term 'streetwise' means to police and members of NGOs. The study supports the police's attribution of the term to children who repeatedly go missing. However, the discovery that police consider 'vulnerable' to be stereotypic appears contrary to them being 'streetwise' and to Newiss' (2003) hypothesis that such cases are not perceived to be serious by the police. Therefore, more insight into what 'streetwise' represents, its associations and implications is required.

Furthermore, past research also demonstrates links between potentially inaccurate stereotypes and prejudice attitudes and behaviour (Halbert, 1997; Hamilton & Rose, 1980; Sollund, 2006). Future research should investigate the influence of stereotypic attributes identified by the current study; possibly attributes that are negatively oriented and might therefore, be expected to result in more negative behaviours. For example, the effects of the police perception that children who repeatedly go missing are a 'nuisance'.

The study has investigated the under-researched area of stereotype development. Whilst it indicates a relationship between experience and stereotypes, it has not been able to confirm that experience influences stereotypes. It does, however, provide a basis for further research to

continue to explore this. If further research identifies experience as influencing stereotype development, the experiences of those with preferable stereotypes might be explored, with a view to encouraging them as a means of creating more useful stereotypes. In addition, more accurate stereotypes could be identified by continuing the work of studies that have identified patterns in cases where people of a certain demographic profile have gone missing (Gibb & Woolnough, 2007; Perkins et al., 2004).

The current study helps to address the negative effects of stereotypes on investigations by providing a basis for further research to examine the effects of the stereotypes identified. Undesirable stereotypes can then be challenged by policy and organisations such as the NPIA's MPB could also begin to raise awareness of the dangers of being influenced by certain stereotypes. With regards to the 'streetwise' stereotype of children who repeatedly go missing, members of NGOs in the study in general, did not hold this stereotype. If future research, which the current study encourages, found that the 'streetwise' stereotype resulted in negative consequences and also that experiences were found to influence stereotypes; encouraging similar experiences or current NGO activities in relation to missing people be undertaken by police, could be beneficial i.e. through the provision of resources to allow police to conduct return interviews. The study also encourages future research to identify and develop more meaningful stereotypes that practitioners such as police and members of NGOs, should be considering and applying. This is because research demonstrates that stereotypes achieve mental shortcuts in information processing (Macrae et al., 2004). As there is an enormous amount of missing person cases reported (Missing People, 2007), developing guidance and practice by applying representative stereotypes has the potential to achieve more efficient and effective responses to cases.

Conclusion

The study identifies attributes contained in police and members of NGOs' stereotypes of missing people. It also supports the previously untested hypothesis that police have a 'streetwise' stereotype of young people that repeatedly go missing. By doing this, it provides a foundation for future research to examine the consequences of such stereotypes, with a view to identifying stereotypes that policy and guidance should challenge. The study has also demonstrated a relationship between experience and the development of stereotypes. Further research should now investigate whether encouraging certain experiences would be an effective means of developing more accurate and useful stereotypes.

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