PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONSHIP OF THE NIGERIA POLICE AS A LAW ENFORCEMENT INSTITUTION AMONG BENIN RESIDENTS

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ABSTRACT
The researchers examined the perception of public relationship of the Nigeria police as a law enforcement institution among Benin residents. The study is anchored on the Systems Theory to access and discuss relevant literatures on the study. Using the survey research method, data for this work was obtained through the use of structured questionnaire. The sample size was 384 respondents who were sampled using the multi-stage sampling technique. The collected data was analyzed using frequency counts and simple percentage method and presented in tables. The study found that the police as an institution are important for maintenance of law and order in the public but the relationship between the police and the public is very bad. Therefore, most importantly the study recommended, among others, the need for Edo State Police Command to put up a public relations programme on the radio and television to enlighten the public on the importance of police public relations, highlight the activities of the police and elicit the support of the public.

Introduction

In today's world, individuals, groups, or institutions try as hard as they can to secure reputable personality for themselves, the community where they carry out their operation and in the wide world at large. They need a high level of public relation in whatever they are doing. Public relation is a communication tool or instrument for any organisation or institution that assists in attaining mutual understanding and goodwill between the organisation and its public (Ogbemi, 2012).

Public relation is very relevant in organisations in the present day since it has become the most powerful tool to ascertain and express the overall image of an organisation to the public (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). Public relations are often key strategic enablers in today's highly competitive business environment (Shamsan, & Otieno, 2015). This is because well-articulated Public relations

programmes will always result in a good approach aimed at improving the company's image to the public. Therefore, public relations is seen to be the outcome of a strategic thinking process by the top management and public relations practitioner in an organisation mainly to build a mutual and cordial relationship with the public in order to have a better company's image communicated to the public. Hence, The Nigeria Police is not an exception in this business. This is because; through the use of public relations the police are able to evaluate its relationship with the public, with the sole purpose of bringing out harmonious adjustment.

Therefore, the Nigeria Police as an institution with significant ties to the society has realised the importance of public relations and has been putting in place various public relations strategies to attract public understanding, acceptance and cooperation by establishing various Public Relations Departments to help bring individuals, groups and institutions in the society closer to the police, so that information can flow freely without suspicion (Nsirim, 2020). This initiative, the police believe, will help reduce crime and criminality and as such enhance the overall public image of the Nigeria Police. Therefore, without a cordial mutual relationship between and organisation and its relevant publics, and organisation might not be able to achieve its goals and objectives, especially in terms of organisational performance and productivity (Nsirim, 2020).

Therefore, it is clear that it will be very difficult for the Nigeria Police as an organisation to succeed in its objective of maintenance of law and order without the cooperation of the people being policed. To solve this dilemma, therefore, there must not only be a cordial relationship between the police and the citizens, but there must also be a working partnership between them if the laudable goals are to be achieved. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to examine perception of public relationship of the Nigeria police as a law enforcement institution among Benin residents.

Statement of the Problem

The stained relationship existing between the police and the public can be attributed to the unnecessary involvement of the police in politics. They become politicised, hence very partisan in carrying out their normal duties. In Nigeria, the police are always ready to protect the government in power to the detriment of the public it serves. Clinard & Albolt cited in Umar & Mohammed (2014) observed that the police treat the middle and upper class with respect, because they see them as politically powerful and therefore worthy of respect. The orientation and training of the police is geared towards protecting the operative system (Clinard & Albolt 1973 cited in Umar & Mohammed, 2014). Therefore, there exist a strained relationship between the police and the public which affects police image and credibility in preventing crime and their overall performance. The role of the police in maintaining law and order as often been questioned by the public. The public negative attitude of the police is informed by the involvement of policemen with partiality of the police in cases to favour the rich, police brutality, and taking of bribe as well the poor response to distress call to mention but a few.

The Edo state police command is not different as many policemen have been found conniving with the men of the underworld. In Edo state, for instance, there is public outcry on the illegal extortion of money from motorist and motorcyclist, maltreatment of suspects by policemen, partiality of the police by taking side with the rich in cases brought to them, poor public interaction by policemen, and among other professional misconduct. Therefore, all these constitute serious problem and gives the police a bad image before the public. It is against this backdrop that the study is undertaken to examine the perception of public relationship of the Nigeria police as a law enforcement institution among Benin residents

Research Objectives

The objectives were to:

1. Determine the nature of relationship between the Nigeria police and public in Edo State.
2. Identify the problems of police public relationship in Edo State Command.

Conceptual Review

Overview of Public Relations

Public relations is a conduit, a facilitator, and a manager of communication, conducting research, defining problems, and creating

meaning by fostering communication among many groups in society. Among the many competing definitions of public relations, Grunig & Hunt (1984) is the most widely cited definition of public relations. They defined Public relations as the management of communication between an organization and its publics. One reason this definition is so successful is its parsimony, or using few words to convey much information. It also lays down the foundation of the profession squarely within management, as opposed to the competing approaches of journalism or the promotion-based approach of marketing and advertising that focuses primarily on consumers (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006; Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023).

Pandey (2012) defines police performance as the quality of police response to intervene in terms of values of justice, due process diligence, best practices and respect for life, and property of all citizens while Maguire (2003) says police performance is the effective delivery of basic services of crime control and maintaining order while treating individuals fairly and within the bounds of the law. It is important to understand that the measurement of police performance is a complicated task that has multiple dimensions (Maguire, 2003).

Public Perception of the Nigeria Police

The Nigeria Police Force, as a law enforcement institution, plays a critical role in maintaining law and order, ensuring public safety, and upholding the rule of law. However, in recent years, the Force has faced intense scrutiny and criticism over allegations of human rights abuses, corruption, and inefficiency (Asemah & Nwaoboli, 2022). The #EndSARS movement, which gained momentum in 2020, highlighted the deep-seated frustrations and mistrust that many Nigerians have towards the Police, particularly the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The protests led to widespread calls for police reform, and the subsequent disbandment of SARS. Despite these efforts, the Police Force still grapples with public perception issues, undermining its effectiveness and legitimacy (Asemah & Nwaoboli, 2023).

By the nature of their operations, the Police are ubiquitous; meaning that they are everywhere in the society. They relate and mingle with individuals and groups at all levels in the society. This is why they are loved and hated depending on circumstances. Perhaps, this is why Pate, Abdullahi & Umar (2014) asserted that the Police are popularly called "*friends to all*" or as the saying goes in Hausa, '*Dansanda Abokin Kowa'* and unlike the other security outfits, the Police are supposed to be the closest and perhaps, the most trusted ally to the ordinary citizens. Although, because of the regularity of interaction between the two sides and the firmness of the Police in the maintenance of law and order, the Police and the Public are bound to experience occasional turbulence in their relationships (Pate, Abdullahi & Umar, 2014). As indicated earlier, the Nigeria Police is the most visible security outfit in the country. The media always feature them; the people always talk about them; the government is always referring to them; in fact stories about the Police bother from the serious, truthful to that of the ridiculous and stupid. You hear stories of bravery as well as jokes of cowardice and the absurd about the Police. In other words, the relationship they have with the society is a relationship of mixed feelings.

Unfortunately, however, studies have shown that majority of stories about the police in the public domain is negative and in bad taste. Alemika & Chukwuma (2004) discovered that highly educated persons were less likely to report arrest by the police. In recent times, it is commonplace to see motorist and commercial motorcycle operators being unjustly extorted at major highways and strategic locations all over the country in the name of checkpoints; in fact, commercial drivers reported the highest level of extortion, arrest, detention and brutality while a good number of members of the public have even observed the police receiving bride, abusing, beating and kicking citizens. In the same vein, Alemika and Chukwuma (2004) added that some police officers even admitted to have ever insulted, beaten and slapped citizens. Similarly Folashade (1999) cited in Pate et al, (2014) added that the public have no faith in police protection. In recent times, it is the loss of public faith in the police, amidst the desire to protect life and property, that various communities across the country evolved alternative ways of protecting themselves such as the vigilante security networks in the south and the *Amotekun* security outfits in the West (the six Yoruba states in Nigeria). This shows that the Nigerian police force does not have a good relationship with the public.

Problems of Police Public Relationship

By the nature of their mandate, the Police have the statutory powers to investigate crimes, to interrogate and prosecute suspects, to grant bail to suspects pending completion of

investigations or prior to court arraignment, to serve summons, and to regulate or disperse processions and assemblies. Police are also empowered to seize and search properties suspected to be stolen or associated with crime and to take and record for purpose of identification (Alemika, 2003). In the process of carrying out their responsibilities, officers and men of the Police Force are bound to be popular as well as unpopular in the society. While they are good guys to a victim of a crime, they would conversely remain enemies to the criminal; such is the world of the Police. They are trained to serve and keep the society safe. However, in other to understand the perception of the people towards the police, Pate et al, (2014) listed the following indices as problems that birthed the negative perception of the public:

1. **Police Brutality:** Police brutality is a common issue that the public worry about in their relationship with the Police. There are numerous allegations of extra-judicial killings, excessive brutalities in dealing with suspects, intimidation, harassment, etc. Stories of accidental discharge, kicking and beating of citizens, arbitrary detentions, etc are commonly associated with the Police. Equally, they are often accused of blind support for brutal leaders and their policies at the various levels of governments.
2. **Corruption:** Corruption is a disease that has permeated the entire fabric of the Nigerian society. Hardly can one mention any sector in the country that the virus of corruption has not affected. It comes in different forms, shapes and ramifications. But perhaps, because of the public trust in the police and the belief that one of the major duties of the police is to investigate cases of corruption and corrupt activities; the dust is often raised when it involves the police. They expect the police to live above board to be able to investigate corruption in the society. There is a notion that the involvement of the Police in corruption undermines their moral authority and basis for fairness in dealing with conflicting parties and handling offenders of the law.
3. **Extortion**: Third, police corruption is often tantamount to extortion, a form of robbery or demand with force. These dimensions of Police corruption explain why the public is threatened by such practices. In fact, it is the most significant source of police brutality. In many circumstances, police brutality is a means of coercing individuals to succumb to demands for bribes, and at some other time, it is punishment for not cooperating with the police in their demand for gratification. The issue of extortion is also commonly associated with the Police. A common trend is the one faced by motorists and commercial drivers on how they drop the popular N50 note or even more, depending on the location at check points, when they existed.
4. **Resource and Management inadequacies:** The general public sympathizes with the Nigeria Police on the glaring difficulties bothering on deficiencies that undermine their efficiency. The system can sometimes frustrate the efforts of individual officers.

From the foregoing, it will be seen; therefore, that a serious communication gap exists between the police and the public and this mutual distrust rather than disappear has continued to grow wider. The situation is so bad that it became fashionable for parents to threaten their unwary and troublesome children with police presence (Aver, 2011). The unfortunate mundane picture of the police painted here by the public has created serious problems for the police/public relations and public perception for the police in the society.

Review of Empirical Studies

Over the years, the image of the Nigeria Police Force has been battered. Therefore, the police commonly work to build their image as law enforcers. Oluwasola (2016) assessed public relations as a tool for repositioning the image of the Nigerian Police Force using the Lagos State

police command as a study. Findings from the study revealed that although, the Nigerian Public Relations Department (NPPRD)'s activities is beginning to penetrate into the minds of the public, its current media relations practice must be addressed. The researcher recommended that police personnel that will be appointed to Man the NPPRD must be certified public relations persons.

Iringe-Koko & Wagbara (2019) examined the perspective of public relations in the quest to eliminate corruption by the Nigeria Police. Findings of the study revealed that there is high level of awareness given to the fight against corruption by the public relations department of the Nigeria Police. Therefore, the researchers recommended that there is need for training and retraining of the Public Relation Officers of the Nigeria Police. It was also recommended that Nigeria Police should ensure that all their Public Relations Department are proactive and result oriented in the elimination of corruption.

Nsirim (2020) examined Police Community Relations Committee (PCRC) as a public relations strategy by the police in Rumuodara community in Rivers State, Nigeria. The objective among others was to find out if PCRC has helped improve the image of the police. The study found that PCRC has helped reduce the crime rate in Rumuodara community, which has in turn improved the image of the police. The researcher, therefore, recommended that PCRC executives should embark on fund raising campaigns to support the police in its battle against crime in the community.

From our empirical review, it is seen that most of our studies focused on police community relations, corruption, and image laundering and crime prevention angle. These studies do not engaged in an analysis of how public relationship influences performance. Hence the gap this study endeavours to address.

Theoretical Framework

Systems Theory

This study is anchored on the systems theory as its theoretical framework. The systems theory, as applied by earliest scholars, implies an analytical scheme for underlying complexity (van Bertalanffy, 1968). The systems theory refers to both complex of interdependencies between parts, component and processes that involves discernible regularities of relationship, and to a similar dependency between such a complex and its surrounding environment (Encyclopedia of Social Science 1968). Toffler (1980, p. 89) maintained that, "a system is set of interacting units which endure, through time within an established boundary by responding and adjusting to changing pressure from the environment in order to achieve and maintain goals". According to Mitchell (1981) a social system consists of two or more persons who are engaged in a patterned or structured form of relationship or interaction, and who are guided by sets of values, and norms generally called roles. In support of the system theory, Brown (1985) observed that a system perspective is the basis for the given definition of public relations in that naturally dependent relationship are established and maintained between an organization and its public with which it interact. Brown argues that any organisation is dependent upon the environment for its monitory, natural and human resources. Hence, for an organisation to achieve its organisational goal in the eyes of the public, communicate effectively and achieve integrity.

The system thereby can be realistically applied to the study. The Nigeria police force is an organisation established under law to achieve a set of objectives for the proper functioning of the system which is made up of different parts, components and units and these parts interacts with one another to achieve a common goal. Therefore, since a system is an entity conceptual or physical which consists of interrelated inter dependent and interacting parts that interact with the environment (public) just like that of the Nigeria police force, the system theory remains the most appropriate theoretical framework work for its explanation.

Methodology

In this study, the survey research method was adopted. This method, as Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafo & Okpanachi, (2022) note, selects and studies samples drawn from the population to discover the relative incidence, distribution and inter-relations of sociological and psychological variables. The survey research method is a suitable method of getting the views of the people about why they behave in a particular way. Since this study is an audience research necessitating opinions, attitudes, motivations and individualistic consideration, the survey method was considered most appropriate for this study. According to National Population

Commission (2016) data, Benin-city has 746,595. In this study the researcher selected three hundred and eighty-four (3840 respondents from Benin City using SurveyMonkey sample size calculator, while multi-stage sampling was employed. In the first stage, the City was divided along the five (5) local government areas (Oredo, Ikpoba-Okha, Egor, Ovia North-East, Uhunmwode). In the second stage, respondents were randomly sampled from each of the five (5) local government areas. Thus, 384 copies of questionnaire were administered to respondents while 317 were retrieved and 300 found usable (78.1%). The data were analysed using simple percentages, frequency counts and mean score and presented in tables.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Respondents' views on whether Edo State Police Command has a PR unit

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	274	91.3
No	-	-
Can't Say	26	8.7
Total	300	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022

From table 7 above, this data clearly established that majority of the respondents are aware that Edo State Police Command has a Public Relations Unit.

Table 2: Respondents' views on the nature of relationship between the public and the Nigeria Police

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Excellent	5	1.7
Good	28	9.3
Fair	92	30.7
Bad	175	58.3
Total	**300**	**100**

Table 2 above clearly shows divergent views on the nature of relationship between the public and the Nigeria Police. This shows that in line with the popular belief, majority of the respondents are of the view that the general public does not have a good relationship with Nigeria police force.

Table 3: Respondents' views on the problems that affect police public relationship

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Maltreatment of suspects by policemen Involvement in crime by the police	59	19.7
Corruption and extortion of money from the public by policemen	51	17
Policemen not being friendly or service-oriented	27	9
Underfunding of the Police	26	8.7
Partiality of the police by taking side with the rich in cases	45	15
All of the above	92	30.7
None of the above	-	-
Total	300	100

Table 3 indicates that all the respondents were able to identify with all the listed factors as problems that affect the public image of the police as well as their performance. Specifically, respondents identified maltreatment of suspects by policemen Involvement in crime by the police (19.7%), corruption and extortion of money from the public by policemen (17%), as well as partiality of the police by taking side with the rich in cases (15%). However, majority of the respondents (30.7%) affirmed that all the listed factors constitute problems affecting the overall image and performance of the Nigeria police.

Discussion of Findings

This section takes us to the thrust of the study which is public relationship and the enhancement of the Nigeria police performance among Benin residents. In terms of the nature of relationship between the Nigeria police and the public in Edo State, the study showed that the police public relations is rated bad. Thus, this relationship has not been able to promote the image of the police and the police as an institution have not lived up to expectation in the eyes of the public. This again, mirrors the finding of the Oluwasola (2016) study that concerted efforts must be made to completely erase police negative image as such effort will achieve unprecedented success when backed by adequate funding by necessary authorities.

In understanding the nature of problems facing police public relations, it was found that maltreatment of suspects, police brutality, corruption and corrupt practices by policemen and partiality or taking sides with the rich and affluent. Others are poor public interaction attitude of policemen, and lack of communication gadgets, vehicles and materials for police operation. This is confirms the perception of the public as the Police as a law enforcement agency has been marred with so many irregularities in the last two (2) decades that majority of members of the public has totally lost faith in their capacity to uphold the law fairly. Again, this corroborate the study of Nsirim (2020) which had found that factors, such as lack of fund to sponsor PCRC activities and poor membership drive, have hindered the effective operation of the Police Community Relations activities in Rumuodara in Rivers State.

From the foregoing, it could be seen that the imperativeness of the Nigeria Police in creating, maintaining and sustaining mutual relationship with members of the public cannot be overemphasised. This is because the public as well as corporate image of the Nigeria Police as an institution saddled with the responsibility of maintaining law and order and protecting lives and property has never been so battered at any point in history than in the present era. This has made the majority of members of the public to develop ill will, hatred and disdain for the men-in-black whenever they are sighted in the society, hence they sometimes withhold crucial information from the police as well as even sabotaging their efforts at resolving crimes and crises situations because they do not necessarily trust and/or have confidence in their capacity to be fair and uphold the rule of law in their dealings. Therefore, there is need for the police force to consciously endeavour to rebuild this image in other to have a good relationship with the members of the public in order for their efforts to be recognised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has given us a better understanding of the nature and problems of police public relations, from the perspective of Benin residents. Arguably, it can be inferred that the relationship between the police and the public in Nigeria is not cordial; the police are more accountable to the government rather than to the members of the public whose interest they were statutorily established to protect. Nevertheless, the enormous role of police public relations in the realisation of the objectives of the police is not in doubt. Therefore, considering the state of police public relations in the Edo State, concerted effort need to be made in restoring sanity to the police force in order to earn the cooperation, support and goodwill of the members of the public. Based on the findings in this study the following recommendations are made:

1. There is need for Edo State Police Command to put up a public relations programme on the radio and television to enlighten the public on the importance of police public relations, highlight the activities of the police and elicit the support of the public.
2. Community heads within the local government areas and the entire society should assist the police in discharging its

duties through provision of information and enhanced cordial relations.

3. The police force should embark on an accountability exercise to fish out the bad eggs. All police practices that are negative and infringe on human rights should be abolished. Similarly, disciplinary action for erring officers who are corrupt should be taken to serve as deterrent.

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