

# Assessing the Causal Effect of Procedural Justice on Legitimacy Using Longitudinal Data

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**Background:** An overwhelming body of evidence demonstrates a strong relationship between perceived procedural justice and institutional legitimacy. Almost always that relationship has been assumed to follow an unequivocal causal path, with procedural justice affecting legitimacy. Nagin and Telep (2017) have recently questioned such connection, pointing at the absence of empirical evidence.

**Methods:** We use the ‘Australian Tax System Surveys - Merged Panel Data 2000-2005’ (Braithwaite, 2009), composed of three waves of 511 subjects from the Australian general population, and the ‘Pathways to Desistance’ dataset (Mulvey, 2016), composed of eleven waves of 1,354 young offenders from Maricopa and Philadelphia County. Random intercepts cross-lagged models (Hamaker et al., 2015) are specified to estimate lagged within-person effects of perceived procedural justice on legitimacy, while controlling for time-constant between person heterogeneity.

**Results:** Contemporaneous effects between procedural justice and legitimacy are statistically significant in each wave, corroborating the well-known relationship between these two constructs. However, in contrast with the theorised causal direction, within-person lagged effects of procedural justice on legitimacy are rarely significant and not always reflecting a positive effect (Figure 1). Similar findings were obtained in the two datasets employed, considering perceptions of procedural justice related to police, judge, and tax authorities.

**Conclusion:** Based on reported subjective perceptions, we find no evidence to support the assumed causal effect of procedural justice on legitimacy. In fact, we find slightly stronger evidence in support of the reverse effect (legitimacy → procedural justice). Similar findings have been observed - yet, for some reason, passed largely ignored - in other longitudinal studies exploring interactions with the police, prison, and school authorities (Abdelzadeh et al., 2015; Beijersbergen et al., 2015; Walters, 2018). Together, these findings question the validity of a key tenant of the procedural justice theoretical framework.

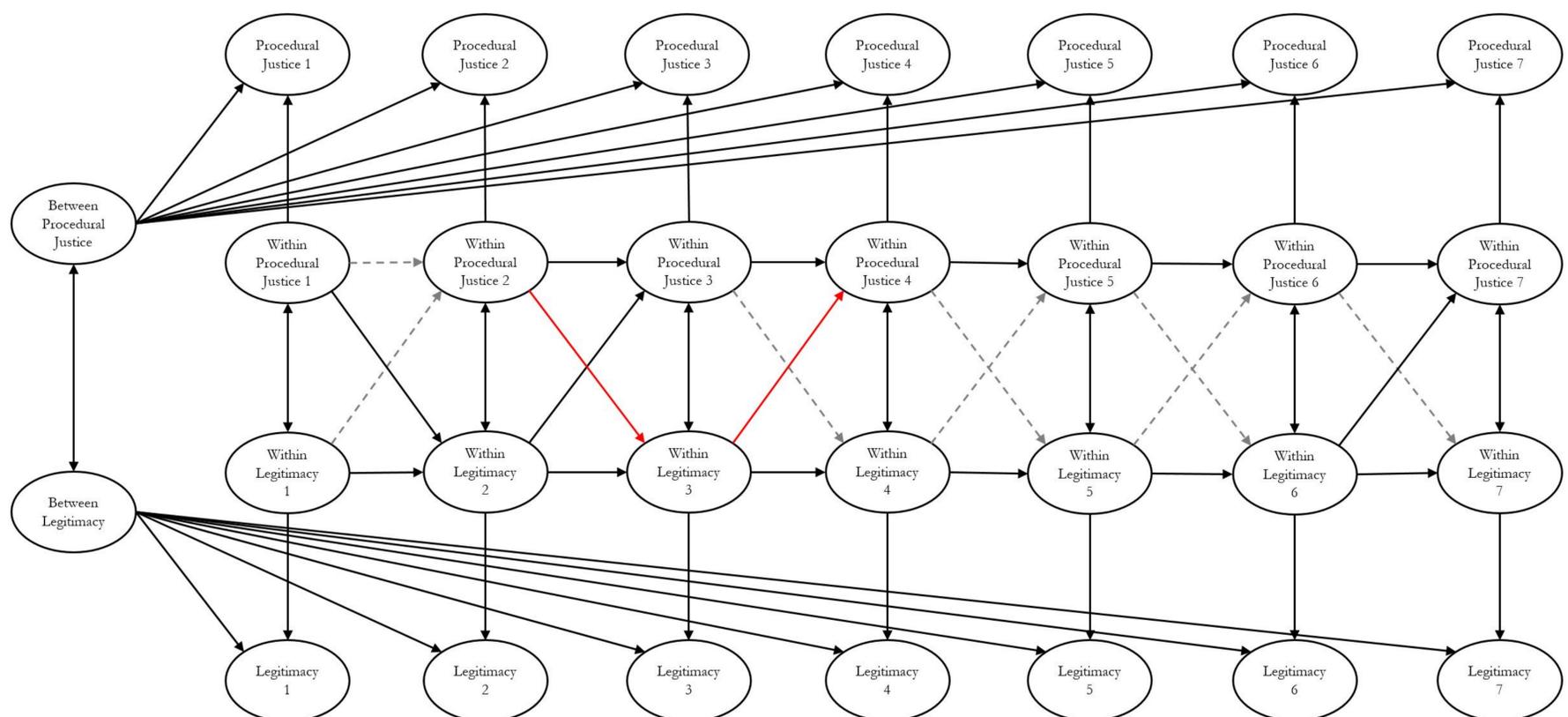


Figure 1: Random intercept cross-lagged panel model exploring the causal relationship between procedural justice and legitimacy perceptions of the police amongst young offenders (continuous lines represent statistically significant effects, positive effects in black, negative in red, grey dashed lines represent non-significant effects)

## References

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