



Confidence in the police among Korean people: An expressive model versus an instrumental model[☆]

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Available online 10 May 2014

Abstract

The legitimacy of police authority has often been questioned due to a relatively low level of public confidence in the police in South Korea. Instrumental and expressive perspectives provide competing explanations of the determinants of public confidence in the police. Empirical studies comparing these competing perspectives are thus far limited to British and US studies. To fill this void, this study used a structural equation modeling approach to examine expressive and instrumental models of confidence in the police among South Koreans. Analyses of data from the Korean National Crime Victimization Survey revealed that both models were empirically supported. However, the expressive perspective (i.e., perceptions of local disorder, informal social control, and social cohesion) was more important than the instrumental perspective (i.e., worries about crime) in explaining confidence in the police among Koreans. The implications for research and policy are discussed based on the findings.

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Keywords: Confidence in the police; Expressive perspective; Instrumental perspective; Legitimacy of police authority; Public satisfaction with the police

1. Introduction

Compared to other developed countries, South Koreans show a relatively low level of confidence in the police. This is evident in comparative research literature analyzing the World

[☆]This work was supported by Kyonggi University Research Grant 2012.

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Value Surveys (see [Cao and Dai, 2006](#); [Cao et al., 2012](#)). Although higher than many less developed countries, confidence in the police in South Korea was lower than that of other Asian and European countries. While the economy of South Korea developed rapidly and improved various aspects of the country, the image of, or confidence in, the police was not likewise improved. The legitimacy of police authority is dependent on public confidence and support ([Skogan and Frydl, 2004](#); [Weber, 1968](#)). The low level of confidence in the police could be related to low crime reporting and less favorable attitudes toward the police ([Priest and Carter, 1999](#); [Tuch and Weitzer, 1997](#)). For these reasons, the Korean National Police Agency (KNPA) has put tremendous effort into improving its public image, even creating a mascot, Po-Do-Ri, to be seen as friendly to the public. Nevertheless, confidence in the police among South Koreans does not seem to improve much ([Jang, 2013](#)).

To improve confidence in the police, the KNPA attempted to reduce the crime rate and the fear of crime victimization while improving the clearance rate of reported crime. These efforts were developed based on the instrumental perspective on confidence in the police. The instrumental perspective follows a rational approach. This perspective links police performance with confidence in the police. Therefore, confidence in the police changes as a function of the fear of crime and victimization ([Skogan, 2009](#)). According to this perspective, the level of confidence in the police results from the public's evaluation of police accountability. Logically, police administrators in South Korea strongly believed in this notion.

Relatively recently, some scholars have developed a different perspective on explaining confidence in the police. The expressive perspective on confidence in the police proposes that public confidence in the police is not driven by instrumental reasons, such as the fear of crime or the crime rate, but by people's assessments of cohesion, social control, and incivility in their neighborhoods ([Garofalo and Laub, 1978](#); [Jackson, 2004](#); [Jackson and Sunshine, 2007](#)). The few empirical studies comparing these competing perspectives have thus far been limited to the United States and Britain ([Jackson and Bradford, 2009](#); [Jackson and Sunshine, 2007](#); [Taylor and Lawton, 2012](#)).

There is no research on which perspective (expressive or instrumental) better explains Korean peoples confidence in the police. The present study adopts a structural equation modeling approach using data from the Korean Crime Victimization Survey to examine these competing perspectives.

2. Literature review

Community policing emphasizes the involvement of the community in policing ([Green and Mastrofski, 1988](#); [Eck and Rosenbaum, 1994](#)). The successful implementation of community policing depends on people's level of confidence in the police. In addition, a high level of confidence in the police could bring several advantages to the police ([Jang et al., 2010](#)). Therefore, numerous studies have explored descriptive as well as explanatory aspects of confidence in the police. Public perception of police has been investigated based on various similar but slightly different conceptual constructs including confidence, legitimacy, trust, and satisfaction ([Cao et al., 1996](#); [Reisig and Parks, 2000](#); [Sampson and Bartusch, 1998](#); [Wells, 2007](#)). Studies on confidence in the police have also targeted the general public, citizens who voluntarily initiated police contact, and citizens who were involuntarily contacted or stopped by the police ([Decker, 1981](#); [Tyler and Huo, 2002](#); [Wells, 2007](#)).

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