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Measuring trust in the police by contextual and individual factors



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ABSTRACT

This study investigate if procedural justice and police competence affects trust in the police independent on the level of perception of corruption, and whether the impact of procedural justice and police competence varies due to perception of corruption. The data used is European Social Survey round 5 (2010), containing 24 countries. To separate individual effects from aggregate effects we used multilevel analyses. The results show that procedural justice and police efficiency are of importance for trust in the police independent of the perception of corruption. But the results also show that the impact of both procedural justice and police competence varies due to the level of perception of corruption. The conclusion is therefore that the fight against corruption must be prioritized to increase trust in the police.

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1. Introduction

The police have an important and crucial role as the only actor in society, together with the military, having legitimate right and even obligation, to use violence in order to check and restore law and order. Not only are the police prominent in this sense. Upholding law and order decreases transaction costs and increases trust in the society, and is as such of importance for economic growth and general prosperity (North, 1990). It is therefore of great importance that citizens have trust in the police. Trust in the police is also of importance for the functioning of the police as an organization (Frank et al., 2005). If citizens does not sense trust in the police, they may not assist and cooperate with the police (Goldsmith, 2005), which may restrict the efficiency of the police, which in turn might lower the trust further (Tyler, 2005).

Research on trust in the police has increased substantially the last ten years (Kääriäinen, 2007). Findings show that trust in the police depends on the public assessments regarding procedural justice of citizen's (Gau, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2013; Nix et al., 2014), as well as assessment of police competence (Frank et al., 2005). Lately, it has also been found that aggregate/contextual aspects are of importance. Most focus has been put on the aggregate level of perception of corruption in the society (Kääriäinen, 2007). However, just few studies have investigated whether individual aspects related to the behaviour of the police (or correctly the citizen's assessment of the police behaviour) and the contextual aspects of perception of corruption are related to trust in the police independent of each other (Ivković, 2008; Jang et al., 2015). None, as far as we know, have investigated interaction effects between assessment of police behaviour and perception of corruption, i.e., if the assessed

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behaviour of the police in general is more or less important in corrupted than non-corrupted contexts (given that perception of corruption correlates with actual corruption – which it to great extent does – see [Appendix A](#)). These two questions are important, since it is not at all certain that assessment of police behaviour have the same impact in every context. Answering these two questions demands data that can combine contextual level variables measuring corruption, and individual level variables measuring assessment of police behaviour ([Kääriäinen, 2007](#)). Nearly all studies regarding police behaviour are performed in one local or national context, where the ability to investigate contextual differences regarding corruption is strongly restricted.

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of the citizen's assessment of police behaviour on trust in the police, the impact of aggregate perception of corruption on trust in the police, and whether assessment of police behaviour varies due to the level of aggregate perception of corruption. With assessment of police behaviour we include both procedural justice (i.e. the quality of the police decision-making in consistency, neutrality, objectivity, lack of capriciousness and the quality of treatment by politeness, dignity and respect) and perception of police competence (to solve crime and arrange security) ([Jackson et al., 2012a,b](#); [Tankebe, 2010](#)). In the study European Social Survey (ESS) round 5, collected in 2010, has been used. Round 5 have a special module about the police, among else containing questions of police competence and procedural justice. The ESS contains almost all of the European countries, and the countries are used to differentiate levels of perception of corruption on the contextual level. Thus, the data allows for a design measuring the impact of perception of corruption on the contextual level as well as the impact of assessments of police efficiency and procedural justice on the individual level ([Jackson et al., 2011a,b](#)).

This study also has policy relevance. For example, if trust is mainly related to perception of corruption, resources to fight corruption will be of more importance than spending resources on campaigns improving and highlighting the good job of the police (the police should of course always treat their fellow citizens with good behaviour and fairness). Contrary, if citizen's assessment of police behaviour is of importance independent of the level of perception of corruption, corruption and police behaviour are equally important to fight to uphold high levels of trust in the police. But if police behaviour is less important in corrupted contexts it is more important to first fight corruption, and then police behaviour, to increase trust in the police.

1.1. Previous research

Previous research has shown that trust in the police is dependent on trust in general – especially trust related to other institutions, as authorities and governmental institutions. Research has found that citizen positive to the political agenda in the country also in general trust the police, and that citizen who are positive towards important social institutions in general trust the police and police officers ([Bridenball and Jesilow, 2008](#); [Frank et al., 2005](#); [Goldsmith, 2005](#); [Runhovde, 2010](#); [Andreescu and Keeling, 2012](#)). It has also been found that trust in the police is closely related to the behaviour of groups and/or single police officers, and that the police as a social institution and authority can be damaged trough bad behaviour from one or a group of police officers ([Chermak et al., 2006](#); [Frank et al., 2005](#); [Weitzer and Tuch, 2005](#)). Thus, it is quite obvious that trust in the police is a rather complicated phenomenon, containing both individual and contextual aspects ([Ivković, 2008](#)).

In the literature substantial emphasis has been put on the behaviour of police officers regarding procedural justice of citizens and the spill over from mistrust in the police officer to mistrust in the police as an institution ([Frank et al., 2005](#); [Goldsmith, 2005](#)). From a theoretical point of view, individual assessments are of importance for trust in the police because trust to great extent depends on the citizen's own experiences of procedural justice and interventions from the police, which includes experience of the capacity of the police competence in the neighbourhood ([Frank et al., 2005](#); [Weitzer and Tuch, 2005](#); [Chermak et al., 2006](#)).

One of the most important aspects regarding police behaviour is whether the action of the police follows a principal of procedural justice ([Bradford et al., 2014](#); [Nix et al., 2014](#); [Tyler, 2005](#)). If police operations are understood as unfair, for example if an operation is understood as racial profiling, or selecting persons who are socially excluded, trust in the police among the target group decreases ([Frank et al., 2005](#); [Goldsmith, 2005](#)) ([Macdonald and Stokes, 2006](#)). But previous studies also indicate that citizen's perception of procedural justice regarding the police to great extent rests on the general belief whether the social institutions in the society is just, fair and valid of legal authority ([Craen and Skogan, 2014](#); [Jackson et al., 2012a,b](#); [Jackson and Sunshine, 2007](#); [Tyler, 2005](#)). If social institutions are perceived as unfair the public internalize the value to obey contacts with legal authorities, especially police officials, because their power can be wield in an unfair way ([Jackson et al., 2012a,b](#); [Jackson et al., 2014](#); [Sargeant et al., 2014](#)). Thus, attitudes towards the police are related to not one but a setting of institutions, which opens for explanations on a contextual level more or less independent on individual factors.

This also implies that trust in the police should vary between different institutional and cultural contexts, for example between countries ([Ivković, 2008](#)). Research shows that this is indeed the case. Citizen in the Scandinavian countries generally harbour high trust in the police because the politicians and authorities are not perceived to be corrupt, while citizen in liberal countries harbour a lower trust because politicians and authorities are seen as corrupt ([Kääriäinen, 2007, 2008](#); [Runhovde, 2010](#)). Similar results holds when it comes to comparisons between advanced democratic countries and unstable or transitional democratic countries ([Cao et al., 2012](#); [Jang et al., 2010](#); [Jang et al., 2015](#); [Anderson and Tverdova, 2003](#)). The more developed the country is regarding democracy the less are politicians and authorities seen as corrupted and the higher is trust in the police. When explaining the correlation between corruption and trust in the police perception of corruption is often understood as a proxy for social capital, inequality and social cohesion ([Goldsmith, 2005](#); [Kääriäinen, 2007](#)).

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