Citizens’ Trust in the Police and Police Trust-Building Strategies: Main findings from a comparative, dynamic study

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Abstract¹
Trust in the police is a topic of both scientific and practical relevance. It is therefore surprising that research has so far neglected the police perspective on trust. This article reports on an international comparative attempt to address this issue by not just studying trust in the police, but also police trust-building strategies. Through the notion of a dialogue between citizens and the police, two empirical halves of the study reflected the citizen perspective on trust and the police perspective, respectively. The research was guided by three theoretical traditions: proximity policing, instrumentalism, and procedural justice. The first part of the study aimed to compare a large number of European countries in terms of trust and its determinants. Results showed that trust in the police was mostly determined by procedural justice (or rather, procedural injustice) and that crime rates were unrelated to trust. The relationship between proximity policing and trust was inconclusive. The second empirical part of the study concentrated on police trust-building strategies in England and Wales, Denmark, and the Netherlands, tracing continuities and discontinuities over the span of several decades. Police trust-building strategies are shaped and influenced by a wide variety of factors and actors, showing that public trust in the police is only one aspect of a much larger complex in which context, events and agency play essential roles. This shows that citizens’ trust in the police and police trust-building strategies are subject to fundamentally different logics, seriously complicating the dialogue between the police and the public.

Keywords: Trust, legitimacy, trust-building, comparative, dynamic.

¹ This article summarises a number of main findings of the book ‘The police, the public, and the pursuit of trust. A cross-national, dynamic study of trust in the police and police trust-building strategies’ (Eleven International Publishing).
**Introduction**

Trust in the police is an issue of the greatest importance for police scholars, policy makers, and police officers. We know from a large body of research that citizens who trust the police are more compliant and cooperative with the police, are more likely to report crime, act more proactively in cases of minor disorder and incivility, are more likely to show trusting and risk-taking behaviour in general, and feel more secure in their daily lives. In short, public trust makes the life of a police officer considerably easier (Goldsmith & Harris, 2012; Goudriaan et al. 2006; Murphy, 2017; Skogan, 2009; Tyler, 2011). With the police forming the frontline of interactions between government and the public, trust in the police is also an important symbolic indicator of the legitimacy of the state (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2017). Understandably, much research on trust in the police has focused on factors influencing citizens’ trust. An increasing number of these studies has been cross-national (or even longitudinal) in nature in attempts to increase the scope and generalizability of research results (Alalehto & Larsson, 2016; Boateng, 2018, Cao et al., 2012, Kääriäinen, 2007; Morris, 2015). An important goal here is to help advise the police on how to gain public trust.

Despite this attention to citizens’ trust in the police, there are still many gaps in our knowledge. The most glaring omission of most studies is in their neglect of the most important actor in shaping citizens’ trust in the police: the police themselves (Gourley, 1954; Tyler, 2011). How do their attempts to gain public trust relate to what we know about factors influencing trust? This is an issue I have addressed through a large-scale study on citizens’ trust in the police and police trust-building strategies (Schaap, 2018). This article summarises some of the main findings of that project.

Police trust building strategies are strategic answers to the question of ‘how institutional arrangements and practices associated with policing can be reshaped so as to make them more deserving of public trust’ (Goldsmith, 2005: 457). The study consisted of two component parts. The first part was a large-scale international comparative, longitudinal assessment of levels of, developments in, and determinants of citizens’ trust in the police across Europe. This was based on survey data from the European Social Survey (2002-2014) and the European Values Study (1981-2008). The second part was an in-depth analysis of how police trust-building strategies were shaped and changed over time in three European countries: England & Wales, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

These two parts were connected through what Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) called the ‘dialogic approach’ towards police legitimacy. This means that when studying trust and legitimacy, the perspective and actions of the ‘audience’ (the public) are as important as that of the ‘powerholder’ (the police). Hence, we should study both trust and trust-building strategies. At present, we know neither what police strategies are best equipped to
gain citizens’ trust, nor how the police actually try to earn or maintain public trust. To address both trust and trust-building, three theoretical traditions were used throughout the study. They fulfilled two different functions corresponding with the distinction between trust in the police and trust-building strategies. First, to help formulate expectations or hypotheses on what factors influence citizens’ trust. Second, as a theoretical basis that police trust-building strategies are derived from.

The theoretical tradition that I label *proximity policing* assumes that trust in the police increases when the police are locally involved, collaborate with citizens and local actors, know what is going on in their neighbourhoods, and view their responsibilities and tasks in a broad, also non-criminal way (Peyton et al. 2019; Skogan & Hartnett, 1997; Skolnick & Bayley, 1988; Terpstra, 2010). Trust-building strategies based on this tradition are extremely diverse but are usually known by labels such as community policing or neighbourhood policing.

The *instrumentalist* school of thought is of a very different nature: its main assertion is that citizens judge the police by their performance in their ‘core task’ of fighting crime. A police organisation that fights crime effectively and efficiently and can prove that this is the case, will in this perspective gain public trust (Hough, 2007; Manning, 2008; Terpstra & Trommel, 2009). As a trust-building strategy, the focus is (influenced by New Public Management principles) on measurable output and achieving numerical goals especially connected to crime rates.

The final theoretical approach is that of *procedural justice*. This school of thought emphasises correct interactions between citizens and police officers, characterised by fair, ethical, honest, consistent, respectful and ethical behaviour by police officers, giving citizens the opportunity to explain their views (Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002). If police officers act according to these principles, citizens are expected to trust them more (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Sargeant et al., 2016). This has clear implications for a trust-building strategy: process-based policing attempts to implement these principles in police practice and attempts to avoid procedural injustice (Tyler, 2005; Reisig, Mays & Telep, 2018).

**Citizens’ trust in the police across Europe**

In the first empirical part of the study, I was guided by three main research questions:

1. To what extent are measures of citizens’ trust in the police empirically comparable across European countries?
2. What are the differences between European countries in terms of citizens’ trust in the police, and how has trust in the police developed across Europe over the past few decades?

3. What factors on the national and on the individual level explain differences between countries in terms of citizens’ trust in the police?

In the first empirical part of the study, large-scale survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS, 2002-2014, including 29 countries) and the European Values Study (EVS, 1981-2008, including 28 countries) were used to compare European countries in terms of levels of trust (where is it high and where is it lower?) and developments over time (where has it increased and where has it decreased?).

Rigorous testing through multi-group structural equation modelling was conducted to ensure that the data were indeed validly comparable across countries and within countries over time. This way, we can be reasonably confident that for example a 6 on a 0-10 scale of trust in the police means the same in the Netherlands as it does in Poland (see also Schaap & Scheepers, 2014). Results indicated that most, but not all, countries and years could be validly compared in terms of their scores on citizens’ trust in the police. Non-comparable countries were removed from further analyses.

Trust in the police was clearly higher in Northwestern European countries (especially in the Nordic countries) and lower in Southeastern Europe (especially in the Balkans). More surprising was that levels of trust had shown rather diverse trajectories over time. While the British Isles were characterised by a long-term decline in trust in the police in the period under study (1981-2014), most of continental Europe featured fairly positive trends in trust both in the long and short term. While trust in the police had, in many European countries, witnessed some drops briefly after the onset of the 2008 economic crisis, trust in the police fared much better than trust in other institutions and in most countries recovered swiftly.

After these descriptive analyses, I proceeded to explain differences between countries and individuals in terms of trust through a series of multilevel regression analyses. The ESS 2010 wave contained the best information for this endeavour in 21 European countries. Indicators used as determinants of trust in these analyses were derived from each of the three theoretical perspectives, both on the individual and on the national level, in addition to a substantial number of individual- and national-level control variables. The main question here was to what extent each of the theoretical perspectives could help explain trust in the police.

Proximity policing was operationalised through an individual-level indicator of how good citizens consider the police to be at preventing crimes from happening, and a na-
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A national-level index of proximity policing. For this index, I had previously approached police scholars across Europe to complete a questionnaire on the extent to which the police in that country adhered to ten different elements of proximity policing. While imperfect, these measures still offer the possibility to provide at least some form of a comparison in terms of the relationship between proximity policing and trust in the police.

Instrumentalism was operationalised on the individual level by citizens’ assessments of how likely the police are to catch criminals and how quickly they will respond to calls for help. On the national level, victimisation rates of burglary and assault were used, as well as homicide rates.

Procedural justice was measured on the individual level through a procedural justice-index (three questions on how likely the police were to treat people respectfully, fairly, and how likely they are to explain their actions when asked to) and by asking citizens how likely they think the police are to take bribes (an indicator of procedural injustice rather than justice). On the national level, corruption as measured by Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index was used to approximate procedural injustice by government services including the police.

Results indicated the strongest support for procedural justice, both on the national and the individual level. The vast majority of differences between countries in levels of trust in the police was explained by corruption. A substantial amount of variation between individuals, moreover, was explained by individual perceptions of police bribe-taking and police procedural justice.

Weaker support was found for proximity policing, although there were indications that proximity policing helped explain at least some of the difference between countries as well as individuals. Results regarding proximity policing had to be interpreted with caution, because of the provisional nature of the proximity policing index.

Weakest support was found for instrumentalism. Remarkably, there was even a weakly positive relationship between homicide levels and trust in the police: higher crime rates were related to more trust. This is the exact reverse to what could be expected on the basis of the instrumentalist logic that citizens judge the police by their capacity to control crime.

Based on the results outlined above, it would make sense to recommend police organisations to focus especially on procedural justice (and particularly avoiding procedural injustice through, for example, corruption). Yet in reality, this is not what we see. Police organisations across Europe often have rather different trust-building strategies than ones
merely built on procedural justice. Why is this the case? The second empirical half of the study aimed to shed light on this question.

**Police trust-building strategies**

I have attempted to make explicit the logic that police organisations, officers and policy makers follow when dealing with the problem of trust in three European countries: England & Wales, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Once again, this was done through three research questions.

4: When and how was citizens’ trust in the police defined as a problem in different European countries, and how did it evolve?

5: Since that time, what strategies and ‘solutions’ have been adopted by whom to address the problem of trust in these countries, and to improve police–public relationships in general?

6: How can we understand the differences that we find between and within countries in terms of problem definition and trust-building strategies?

Guided by Kingdon’s (1995) distinction between problem definition, policy generation, and political events, I first aimed to distil from each country the moment citizens’ trust in the police was first defined as a police or policy problem. Then, I traced the different trust-building strategies that have since been generated and designed from the moment of ‘invention’ (Lee, 2007) of trust in the police as a policy issue to the moment of study. By analysing different phases, continuities and discontinuities, of police trust-building strategies in these three countries, we can gain a much more profound insight into what the police do and why when it comes to trust. Finally, a comparison of the three cases aimed to achieve overarching insights into how trust-building strategies come to be and how they develop.

All three countries have considered trust in the police to be a policy problem for a substantial amount of time. In the case of the Netherlands, this has been the case since at least the 1970’s; in the UK, since at least the 1980’s, and in Denmark since the 2000’s. Trust-building strategies and thinking about trust predates these moments in all three countries, yet as a policy-wise relevant issue, these are the periods when trust in the police was ‘invented’ as a problem.

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2 For more detailed information on the in-depth case studies, I refer to the full study (Schaap, 2018) or a recent contribution with a somewhat different emphasis, but using the same source material (Schaap, 2020).
The circumstances surrounding this invention consist in each country of a confluence of a range of factors, but in all cases, there was some sort of trust-related shock or crisis that played a vital role. In England and Wales, these were the inner-city riots of the early 1980’s; in the Netherlands, the societal unrest of the second half of the 1960’s and the loss of legitimacy of state institutions surrounding this period. In Denmark, the crisis was arguably government-led, with a controversial police reform in 2007 and its botched early implementation.

After the inception of trust as a policy issue, a range of strategies was formulated in each country to address the problem. These strategies diverged strongly in nature and core assumptions (see the three theoretical perspectives that most strategies are in some way derived from). They also varied in the extent to which they were actually adopted, how long they lasted, how wide-ranging they were in implications, and how successful they were perceived to have been. I provide three fairly randomly selected examples just to briefly illustrate some of the complexity involved.

In England and Wales, one of the responses after the Brixton riots and the ensuing Scarman Report (1982) was to introduce community policing experiments to restore the connection between the police and the public. However, these experiments hit the rocks soon after, when all political and police attention and resources were drawn to dealing with the 1984-1985 Miners’ Strike. It would take until the early 2000’s before community policing (although then termed neighbourhood policing) made a comeback under the New Labour administration to address the paradox of falling crime rates coinciding with declining trust.

In the Netherlands, too, a progressive task force of mostly young police officers had designed a trust-building strategy based on proximity to deal with societal unrest (Heijink et al., 1977). However, the trajectory of this strategy was completely different. Lack of organisational support meant that for about ten years after the release of the report, its recommendations were ignored. However, after a new police system was implemented in the early 1990’s, the proximity policing strategy proposed by the task force was increasingly, although in altered shape, adopted and implemented—to the extent that it remains an important part of Dutch trust-building to this very day.

Meanwhile, these two responses to urban unrest can be contrasted with the Danish response to the (on the surface) rather similar riots in the Nørrebro neighbourhood of Copenhagen in 1993. The ensuing violence (during which 113 shots were fired by police) was framed not as a problem of police legitimacy or public trust, but as the outcome of poor public order policing strategies. Hence, it led to reforms in riot police practices, but not to widespread trust-building strategies. When police trust-building emerged in Den-
mark, it was initially because of an individual police chief’s interest in community policing, not because there was a perceived problem with trust (see Holmberg, 2002).

So how to understand such differences between countries? Key here is to take context and agency into account, as well as the occurrence of (unexpected) events. These two factors play essential roles in problem recognition, policy generation, and adoption of trust-building strategies. After extensive cross-national analysis, I drew up a summary of what I termed the trust-building complex, where each process in the stage of trust-building was defined and influenced by a range of factors and actors. Here, whether and how a problem of trust is recognised depends on the conceptual understanding that key actors have of trust and what their diagnosis is of the problem they are facing.

What type of strategy is then generated or developed, depends strongly on the main actors involved and what sort of ‘rationalised myth’—images of how a legitimate organisation is supposed to operate—dominates among them. Such strategies can take the form of proximity policing, instrumentalism, process-based policing or a different strategy altogether. Finally, a wide range of factors that can stimulate, impede or transform the strategy into something else than was originally intended shape the adoption of trust-building strategies.

How each of these phases turned out, the study indicated, was shaped by a specific constellation of context, events and individual agency. Elements of language and culture, ideology, unexpected events or crises, all of these could contribute to the shaping of trust-building strategies.

### Table 1: The trust-building complex³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process:</th>
<th>Factors defining process:</th>
<th>Context, events and agency:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem recognition</td>
<td>Conceptual understanding of trust</td>
<td>Language and culture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diagnosis of problem</td>
<td>Acuteness of problem or crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generation of strategies</td>
<td>Dominant rationalised myth</td>
<td>Influence from other countries or sectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Main actors involved</td>
<td>Ideology and politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption of strategies</td>
<td>Factors that stimulate the strategy</td>
<td>(Unexpected) events and open situations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factors that impede the strategy</td>
<td>Preferences of key individuals/actors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Factors that transform the strategy</td>
<td>Police support</td>
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<td>Historical and structural aspects</td>
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The point of this analysis was not to provide a complete overview of what factors shape police trust-building. Rather, it was to show that police trust-building strategies are de-

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³ This table has also previously been published in Schaap (2018) and Schaap (2020).
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Pendent on a wide range of different factors and occurrences, often coincidental or unplanned. This makes police trust-building strategies not irrational per se. They are goal-oriented activities but determined and shaped by factors far beyond what we know ‘works’. Surprisingly, procedural justice was in none of the three countries under study the main strategy to gain public trust, although elements of process-based policing were recognizable in each of the three countries at some point in time.

Conclusions

In this study, I attempted to contrast (determinants of) trust in the police with police trust-building strategies. This analysis questions the lazy metaphor of the policy dashboard where interventions or strategies can be implemented by flicking a switch: ‘for more trust-building, push A’. Such a reductionist view of how strategies come to be cannot tell us why police organisations across Europe behave so differently (at different moments in time) to one another. After all, the first empirical half of this study indicated that procedural justice is strongly related to trust and instrumentalism is not. This suggests that police organisations would do well to focus on procedural justice rather than crime fighting. That police organisations act differently, however, than I would recommend on the basis of this analysis, does not mean that they are irrational.

What has become clear is that these two different angles show the different logics and rationalities that govern citizens’ trust in the police as opposed to those that shape police trust-building strategies. The social-psychological approach that works when attempting to understand why citizens trust or distrust the police falls far short when studying police trust-building efforts. The police follow an institutional, rather than social psychological, logic in building trust. That does not imply that considerations about what citizens want, provided through for instance research results, has no influence on police trust-building efforts. It just means that these are not the only factors involved, nor possibly the most important ones. For the police, just as important is the notion of institutional support and of key individuals for trust-building strategies. A strategy also has to fit into (national) cultural and structural features of society and of the police organisation.

A mixed-method approach of the type the present study applied provides us with richer information and insights than a single-method research strategy would. Quantitatively, we have learned that the strongest relationship is between trust and procedural justice and the weakest with instrumentalism, while proximity policing falls somewhere in between. Qualitatively, the study has shed light on the way police organisations follow (or do not follow) strategies based on these theoretical notions, when they do, why, and how. It is my hope that an understanding of both sides of this dialogue contributes both to the scholarly study of trust and to police trust-building strategies in practice.
References


