

The Police, the Public, and the Pursuit of Trust

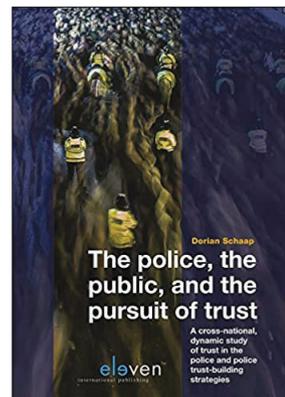
Dorian Schaap

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Reviewed by

R.I. Mawby

Visiting Professor of Rural Criminology, Harper Adams
University, Newport, UK



The comparative study of police systems has grown exponentially since the pioneering work of David Bayley (1985). This is so both among academics and among police managers, as the global village has allowed policy transference between police organisations in various countries (Jones & Newburn 2006), albeit such transfers have been more about 'mix and match' than direct adoption of police successes, where they exist. That said, much of the comparative literature is heavily influenced by the Anglo-American tradition of policing studies. It is thus refreshing to report on comparative analysis of three Northern European countries carried out by Dorian Schaap, a Dutch sociologist.

As the title indicates, Schaap's study addresses trust in the police, a topic that has been of concern to both academics and the police across the world (Goldsmith & Harris 2012; Jackson & Bradford 2010), and is of particular relevance in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in the USA. The book is broadly divided into three sections. In the first, Schaap seeks to define trust and offer alternative explanations for changes in public

trust in the police. Secondly, he uses secondary sources to compare public trust within Europe and changes over time. Finally, he reports on his primary research with 'experts' in three European nations – England and Wales, Denmark and the Netherlands – to address how trust is perceived by police and their political masters, and what strategies have been adopted to increase levels of trust.

In the first section, Schaap discusses the concept of trust. As he readily acknowledges, trust is only one aspect of public perceptions of the police: efficiency, effectiveness, fairness, legitimacy, satisfaction, confidence, approval, etc. have commonly been used to measure public attitudes towards the police and may overlap to a greater or lesser extent. Moreover, Schaap informs those of us with more limited language skills than his that in many languages the same word denotes both trust and confidence. That said, Schaap moves on to consider modern strains of professional policing that underpin the concept of trust. Following, albeit unacknowledged, Wilson's (1968) distinction between *varieties of police behaviour*, he identifies three paradigms: proximity policing; instrumentalism; and procedural justice. These, he argues, are distinctive but overlap. Proximity policing emphasises a close relationship between police and public, best epitomised by community, neighbourhood or problem-oriented policing, with the public commonly viewed as partners in crime prevention. Instrumentalism prioritises results through police targets, with the public viewed as consumers who merit a police service that is both efficient and effective in providing what consumers want. Procedural justice focuses on openness and equal treatment. Like instrumentalism, the public are seen as consumers; like proximity policing they are entitled to full explanations for police decision-making, but in contrast to proximity policing they should be treated equally rather than through applying discretion.

In the second section of the book, Schaap considers variations in trust across Europe. He argues that there is widespread concern that trust in the police has declined and suggests three possible reasons for this: the desacralisation thesis, applied particularly in Britain (Reiner 2010), that suggests the crumbling of a Golden Era when the police was admired and revered; the safety-utopia thesis that the police has been held accountable for rising crime rates; and the post-authoritarian paradox thesis, more commonly associated with new democracies, where crime may have risen but where publicisation of crime is undoubtedly greater than under communism.

However, when Schaap considers findings from the European Values Studies (EVS), 1981-2008, and the European Social Survey (ESS), 2004-2014, he finds little to justify high or rising mistrust in the police. While there are variations across Europe, there is little evidence that these are related to his three policing paradigms, although proximity policing appears to have a moderate effect on trust levels. Nor is there any strong evidence of a decline in trust, the exception perhaps being in England and Wales. Moreover, compared

with other public institutions levels of trust in the police appear relatively high. Perhaps most surprising, in the light of the subsequent *Black Lives Matter* movement, there is little evidence of race/ethnicity differences.

So does this imply that the police have successfully addressed public concerns? In the third section, Schaap takes three case studies, England and Wales, Denmark and the Netherlands, and through a detailed review of public concern and police responses in the post-war era, supported by interviews with key informants from the police, civil servants and governments, considers the priorities identified and the policies adopted to address them. In England and Wales, he considers crises of confidence epitomised in the Brixton riots, the miners' strike and the murder of Stephen Lawrence against the backdrop of rising crime rates, and argues that proximity policing was the main strategy deployed to increase public confidence, with performance targets illustrating a recognition of instrumentalism. Interestingly, centralising tendencies within the police, notably in the closure of rural police stations, gets scant acknowledgement. In contrast, the move to centralisation is seen as an important component of shifts in trust in Denmark. There riots in Norrebro in 1993, against the decision to join the EU, was a further example of inner-city riots that questioned the assumption that public trust in the police was high. However, Schaap argues that trust was rarely acknowledged as an issue, illustrated in the consistent prioritisation of instrumentalism, where the police decided that public approval would be gained if they concentrated on reducing serious crimes, that is, crimes the police decided were serious. In contrast to England and Wales and Denmark, Schaap argues that in the Netherlands the experience under Nazi occupation meant the police were regarded with suspicion. Youth conflict, police violence and a hostile press fuelled public mistrust. While proximity policing was seen as the preferred strategy to counter this, centralisation, performance targets introduced through NPM, and a focus on procedural justice meant that the police were drawn in different directions, with tensions most evident in the policing of minority communities.

In drawing together the evidence from his case studies, Schaap clearly identifies proximity policing as the most effective means of enhancing public confidence in the police. However, it is equally clearly not sufficient, as he acknowledges in quoting Jackson and Bradford (2010, 245): 'A trustworthy police force is seen by the public to be effective, to be fair, and to have shared values, interests, and a strong commitment to the local community.' That is, instrumentalism and procedural justice are also important elements.

So where does that leave us, academics, policy-makers and practitioners? It is no criticism to say that Schaap provides no definitive answers. Social scientists rarely do! But he poses a number of questions that stimulate thought and may ideally inform policy.

His analysis is also not uncontroversial. The Comparative researcher is perhaps the social science equivalent of the pentathlete in athletics: admired for versatility and wide-ranging ability but 'a master of none'. In my own scholarship on comparative police systems (Mawby 1990; 1999), I confronted the realisation that my interpretation of policing in individual countries could be unpicked by specialists from any one country. While Schaap limits this danger by sensibly focusing on only three European nations, he is inevitably open to the same problems. For example, in buying into the myth of a British 'Golden Age' of harmonious police-public relations, he sometimes forgets that this was, indeed, a myth. My own childhood rooted in a mining community with memories of the miners' strike and subsequent General Strike (1926) contained no elements of a trusted police force and was more in line with the image portrayed in the miners' strike of 1984-1985 (Fine & Millar 1985). By that time, of course TV portrayals of the policing of protests gave a dramatic edge to newspaper presentation from earlier conflicts, a trend that has developed exponentially through social media in the smart-phone era, where video footage of recent police killings of suspects in the USA raises public awareness of police brutality to a new level. Another problem with relying on oral history and secondary sources is that decisions are selectively justified, by policymakers at the time and subsequently by commentators. Changes to police structures and policies may be justified as led by a desire to improve police/public relations because this has widespread appeal rather than because it was a key priority of policy makers. Thus, Schaap's discussion of the creation of Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales as a means of enhancing community accountability is disingenuous. What it did, as then-Home Secretary Theresa May wanted all along, was to strengthen the *political* accountability of the police, with public accountability minimal, and by 2016 all Police and Crime Commissioners were nominees of the two main political parties (Mawby & Smith 2017).

Finally, it must be stressed that the primary, detailed research by Schaap depends on interviews with former police managers and participants in the policy making process. There are no interviews with those publics whose trust in the police is central to the debate, other than secondary data using a couple of questions from cross-national surveys. At least two questions arise from this. On the one hand, do citizens hold different views depending on which police? This is clearly crucial in European countries where there are two or more police systems: for example, do the French public accord greater trust to the *gendarmerie* than to the *police nationale*, or *vice versa*? But specialisms within all police organisations mean that there are different policing bodies that might be viewed very differently by the public: drug units, public order police, detectives, neighbourhood officers etc. On the other hand, how do different sections of the population perceive the police? Does the cross-national finding of no ethnic distinctions hold up to more nuanced critiques? Do those who come into contact with the police in different contexts – as victims, suspects or witnesses – view their trustworthiness differently? After all, a police system should be judged according to the experiences of all those groups of actors who

pass through: victims need to be able to trust the police to treat them with respect and their complaint with diligence and efficiency; suspects need to be able to trust the police to conduct a thorough investigation and not plant evidence or misrepresent the facts. To gain the trust of these different actors may be an impossible target, but it is surely important to identify where the inevitable weaknesses lie.

These questions are not ones that Schaap sought to answer, and it would be unfair to use them to criticise him. Rather, this text should be viewed as a stimulus for future researchers to compare trust in the police in different societies from different perspectives.

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