

Exploring Trust in Perception of Crime Models in South Africa

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Abstract

Social capital has been poked and prodded by scores of intellectuals across a vast array of disciplines since 18th century Progressive L.J. Hanifan first coined the term (Hanifan 1916), and its resurgence in popularity over the last 30 years has fueled much contemporary discourse in the social sciences. Particularly in criminology, scores of studies conducted during this period articulate the positive and negative effects of social capital in the creation and maintenance of safe, healthy communities and civil social structures (Jacobs 1961; Coleman 1990; Putnam 2000; White N.d.). However, while conceptually social capital and the components of which it is comprised (e.g., trust, reciprocity, civic engagement) are not inherent to one locale, much of this research traditionally considers only Western perspectives grounded in U.S. or U.K. scholarship. This study was an attempt to rectify this gap by exploring the relationship between one particularly common component of social capital – trust – and public perceptions on crime in a setting seldom covered in the extant literature: South Africa. Confirmatory factor analysis and OLS regression revealed varying magnitudes of positive relationships between trust and crime perceptions the state of safety and violence in the country, as well as the quality of the government's handling of crime. Implications for these findings are discussed.

Introduction

Stemming from the early social disorganization research of Shaw & McKay (1942, 1949), countless studies have explored structural correlates of crime and deviance within neighborhood settings. Popular among them, social capital weighs in as both a positive and negative force impacting criminal activity. On one hand, social capital has been shown to invoke negative consequences by way of the exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and the fortification of bonds between collaborators in

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deviance (Portes and Landholt 1996; Portes 1998; Forrest and Kearns 2001; Morenoff, Sampson et al. 2001; Statistics 2001; Browning, Feinberg et al. 2004). In fact, a fair amount of the current literature offers plausible evidence that criminals vary in their capacity to succeed in illicit enterprises based upon the breadth and quality of collaborations with lucrative offenders (Nguyen and Bouchard 2013). While not all offenders are equally capable of forging and maintaining such connections, those who are usually achieve greater prosperity in crime precisely because they can leverage their social capital in the form of those networks with other successful offenders into resources like knowledge about new illicit opportunities, strategies for avoiding incarceration, and general social support/encouragement of their involvement in criminal activity (Hansen 1995; Burt 2000; Lederman, Loayza et al. 2001; McCarthy and Hagan 2001; Nguyen and Bouchard 2013).

Some scholars have further argued social capital – even just the capacity for producing it – tends to increase exponentially with the size of an offender's networks, and thus the chances for prosperity in illicit behavior grow (McCarthy and Hagan 2001; Nguyen and Bouchard 2013). Furthermore, where violent criminals are active participants with law-abiding citizens in the types of interactions that produce and/or are produced by social capital, the influence of such criminal element may result in propensity for further violent offending within the community (Lederman, Loayza et al. 2001). So too may a community tightly bonded through social capital, if prone to justify certain criminal behavior as a necessary and/or aspirational means of goal achievement, offer protection for certain criminals and possibly even revere some law-breaking behavior as acceptable (Lederman, Loayza et al. 2001).

But more often, social capital is cited for its crime-reducing properties due in part to the bonds of cohesion made possible from social capital that decrease social transaction costs, and thus allow for more peaceful conflict resolutions. Additionally, it is held that communities with stronger bonds between members are better at avoiding the “free-rider problem” of collective action – a phenomenon wherein individuals receive the benefits of collective action without contributing to its creation or maintenance (Lederman, Loayza et al. 2001). Further empirical support for social capital's reductive effect on crime is found in Messner, Rosenfeld, and Baumer's (2004, 2001) detailed models confirming the negative correlations between social capital and homicide rates (Rosenfeld, Messner et al. 2001; Messner, Rosenfeld et al. 2004) net the influence of common structural covariates like resource deprivation, population size, and Southern geography, as well as the significance of family-based social capital (alongside neighborhood disadvantage) in predicting individual-level violence among young people (De Coster, Heimer et al. 2006), and the negative correlation between faith-based associations and civic engagement with murders among young people in rural neighborhoods (Lee and Bartowski 2004).

Lederman (2001) attributes the dual propensity of social capital to induce or diminish crime to its conditional nature relative to certain groups. Simply stated,

social capital's potential for producing negative outcomes is specific to certain negative-reinforcing groups like gangs, ethnic clans, and exclusive neighborhoods. Particularly with gangs, some notable ethnographic studies of gang culture reveal a deeply embedded set of norms consistent with social capital, and centered around "giving back" to the gang and/or affiliated neighborhood as an important and vital function of maintaining good standing within the gang collective (Venkatesh and Levitt 2000; Venkatesh 2006).

Woolcock (2001) also remarked on an especially troubling characteristic of social capital's application in empirical research: its tendency to be exported wholesale from Western settings with little regard for the relevance of cultural context in its conceptualization. A likely culprit of this skew is the difficulty traditionally encountered in collecting large-scale aggregate data in lesser-studied markets, and the resulting lack of data sophistication to perform the sort of analysis comparable to Western-based research of subjects like social capital (Halpern 2005). Conversely, scholars in the U.S. and U.K. have historically had greater resources with which to capture the sort of group level data necessary for such research. Naturally, this heavy Western orientation in the extent data and subsequent literature raises validity concerns when attempting to apply social capital theory and related models in non-Western contexts. Fortunately, a number of data sources have begun to appear in recent years that open up new opportunities for criminological exploration of social capital and its composite variables outside of the U.S. and U.K.; one such source is the Afrobarometer Survey Series.

Conducted in 2004, the Afrobarometer 2.5 Survey is a multinational study of 2,400 South African citizens conducted ten years following the official abolishment of apartheid. The survey probed attitudes on a number of public issues, including but not limited to: the quality of governance, the state of economic markets, and perceptions of the state of society past and present. Using Afrobarometer data, Geoffrey Evans and Pauline Rose (2007) illustrated how more exposure to formal education in Malawi (particularly at primary school levels) correlated positively with both greater understanding of how a democracy in general works, and support for democratic initiatives (Evans and Rose 2007). Bratton and Mattes' (2003) use of Afrobarometer data exposed the racial lines along which preference in government economic reforms are dictated in South Africa; whereas White South Africans more heavily favored free market economic structure, Black South Africans preferred more government involvement (Bratton and Mattes 2003). Audrey Sacks and Margaret Levi (2010) used Afrobarometer data to explore the link between social welfare (particularly by way of food "security" – adequate and reasonable access to healthy stores of food) and effective government structure and administration. However, crime scholars with an eye towards the relevance of social capital in non-Western settings can find insight in two particular measures in the Afrobarometer survey: trust and perceptions of crime.

Relevant Literature

Social capital is understood to be the collective product of relationships and behavioral norms between individuals and/or institutions that allow for access to certain valued benefits (e.g., poverty alleviation, employment opportunities, family stability) and attainment of goals often unreachable through alternative means (Coleman 1988; Coleman 1990; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000; Halpern 2005; Woolcock 2010; Neal 2011). It is the result of convergence between an array of attributes like trust, reciprocity, volunteerism, and civic engagement within an organized collective (e.g., residents in a neighborhood, inmates in a prison, students within a school), and usually coincides with the forging of firm social networks that channel the exchange of goods and services received through such capital. With respect to communal problems like crime, social capital investments are vital to meaningful connections between fellow residents when regulating behavior and addressing such problems (Bursik and Grasmick 1993). When these investments are absent from a community, the ability of its residents to achieve consensus on behavioral norms and achieve social control (and thus, lower crime and improve quality of life) is greatly reduced (Bursik 1999; Cancino 2005).

Noteworthy in criminological considerations of social capital is ***trust*** – the main attitudinal prerequisite of social capital. Among the most frequently cited variables in social capital literature (Portes 1998; Cancino 2005; White 2006), and some would regard the most predictive component of it (Neal 2011), trust is the variable that reduces transaction costs associated with volunteerism and minimizes the number of resources required to ensure the behavior of individuals and groups within a community align with the community's collective interests (Uslaner 1999; Putnam 2000). The attention to common interests and community welfare demonstrative of social capital develops from a generalized form of trust grounded in the belief that inhabitants of a community and institutions serving those inhabitants will usually act in the best interests of the collective when values and behavioral standards between both individuals and institutions align. With respect to crime, a host of criminological studies support the restraining effect of trust on crime in residential communities (Putnam 2000; Ross and Jang 2000; Cancino 2005; Crawford 2006; Briggs 2010; Wickes 2010), and it is generally held that as social trust increases so too does support for establishing and enforcing rules to prevent crime and general disorder in a community (White 2006).

Rosenfeld, Messner, and Baumer (2004, 2001) offered a particularly succinct interpretation of how trust affects crime within the frameworks of social disorganization and anomie theories undergirding the criminological effect social capital is reported to have. They argued that, under social disorganization theory, communities with weak social controls are littered with unorganized and unsafe groups where trust is deficient. Within such communities, anomic behavior and a lack of firm moral direction is also prevalent, resulting in residents acting more selfishly and exploitive of others. In such disorganized

communities, where residents act more often in their own best interests and operate under the perception that others in the community are inclined to behave similarly, efforts to maintain social trust tend to flounder and crime inevitably increases.

Further evidence points to the significance of trust in variations on public perceptions of crime. Particularly in the U.K., trust in government information is a key driver of how citizens view government measures addressing crime (Duffy, Wake et al. 2008), and studies there suggest low levels of public trust in government reporting of crime data, government usage of such data, and the motives directing both activities (Duffy, S.Hall et al. 2005; Duffy, Wake et al. 2008). Accordingly, politicians and other affiliates of government – among the least trusted of institutions in the U.K. – are confronted with considerable challenges when attempting to report criminal activity and generate public support for crime reforms given that such broad mistrust is hard to shake once entrenched in the minds of citizens (Duffy, Wake et al. 2008).

Alternatively, research across several countries report that law enforcement agencies (especially police officers) are among the more trusted institutions when compared to government and mass media sources (Duffy, Wake et al. 2008; Garcia-Espana, Diez-Ripolles et al. 2010; Varma and Marinos 2013). At least one benefit of this higher trust is a heightened propensity for residents to report criminal activity to police officers, which in turn eases some of the challenges of local law enforcement. Such is the level of trust in law enforcement in certain countries that perceptions of shortcomings in the execution of criminal justice are attributed less to inadequacies within police units and more towards the failure of government in properly support law enforcement officers. There even some sentiment that police officials would be more trustworthy than conventional government or media outlets in conveying the status of crime and preventive measures being taken within a community (Duffy, Wake et al. 2008).

However, contrasting data from South Africa presents a picture of more ubiquitous lack of trust in institutions that warrants closer investigation with respect to public perception. For instance, albeit based on a considerably more limited body of work in comparison to non-African nations, South Africans do echo mistrust in government and media similar to what has been observed in other countries, but they also report considerably less trust in police officers. They are quick to draw associations between high levels of crime and perceptions of rampant corruption throughout police units. In fact, some reports indicate mistrust of police officers is highest when compared to all other entities within in the criminal justice system, and among the highest across all public service sectors (Mattes 2006). With less trust, citizens are less inclined to perceive it easy to acquire help from police officers (Mattes 2006), and consequently may be less inclined to seek assistance from the police in situations when they are needed, or perhaps even chose to take matters into their own hands.

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While this extant literature offers some useful insight, scholarship documenting the relationships between trust and public perceptions of crime clearly needs more clarification if more sophisticated discourse is to develop. With so much of the current research skewed towards Western settings, and given the contradictory evidence from South Africa, it is difficult at present to pinpoint how trust dictates public perceptions of crime in non-Western communities without delving deeper to extrapolate nuances of the relationship. Given its connection to social capital, efforts to expand upon the understanding of trust as it correlates with crime perceptions should also further advance new pathways to studying social capital components outside of conventional Western contexts. This study represents such an attempt to rectify this gap in the literature by exploring the relationship between trust and public perceptions on crime in a setting seldom covered such as South Africa.

Methodology

The data for this study comes from the 2004 Afrobarometer Survey, a study of 2,400 South Africans sampled at the census enumeration area level, and randomized via a “probability proportionate to population size (PPPS)” component applied to ensure more populated territories had a greater chance of inclusion in the sample (Afrobarometer 2.5 2005). A gender quota was also applied to ensure every other interview conducted prior to the survey was with a female participant. This study also derived its definition of social capital primarily from the works of James Coleman (1990), Robert Putnam (Putnam, Leonardi et al. 1993; Putnam 2000), Michael Foley and colleagues (Foley, McCarthy et al. 2001).

Using Afrobarometer data was ideal due to the multiple measures of trust represented in the survey. However, preliminary analysis revealed collinearity between several of the trust measures. This was corrected through scale reduction via factor analysis, with a result of four composite measures: *trust in government*, *trust in media*, *social trust*, and *trust in law and justice institutions*. The scale fit between these composite variables was high (KMO = .862) and statistically reliable (alpha = .851). 53% of data variation was accounted for between the four composites, and thus the hypotheses tested in the study were as follows:

Ho: There is no relationship between crime perceptions crime and measured responses on trust.

H1: For each composite measure, higher levels of trust result in more positive crime perceptions crime (i.e., that the government is doing a good job of reducing crime, and that safety from crime and violence is better now compared to a few years ago), and crime victimization experience moderates this relationship to some extent (e.g., the relationship between trust and crime perceptions crime will be significantly stronger for

respondents who've been victimized by crime more frequently).

Additional (albeit weaker) collinearity was observed amongst the variables measuring crime perceptions (KMO = .500; alpha = .504) and crime victimization experience (KMO = .500; alpha = .612), and thus was addressed similarly; one composite variable was created for each construct. Once these corrections were applied, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to produce the correlation results.

Findings

Four models were tested (one for each composite trust measure) and each confirmed that trust correlates positively with crime perceptions in South Africa. The first model tested – trust in government (see *Table 1*) – was of moderate strength (R = .483; p < .001) and explained 23% of variation in crime perceptions crime. As respondents reported higher trust in government, they also seemed to harbor more positive perceptions of the status of crime (beta = .504; p < .001):

Table 1. OLS Regression models predicting crime perceptions

<i>Variables</i>	B (SE)	Beta
Trust in Government	.628 (.031) ^{***}	.504 ^{***}
Crime Victimization	.112 (.092)	.060
Trust in Government (X) Crime Victimization	-.086 (.049)	-.089
Constant	1.592 (.061) ^{***}	
R-Square	.232	

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; p values computed for two-tailed significance tests

A similar, but weaker model was revealed between trust in law and justice institutions and crime perceptions (R = .374; p < .001). As *Table 2* reveals, South Africans exhibiting more trust in institutions assigned to enforcing law and upholding order also tended to hold more positive crime perceptions (beta = .386; p < .001) irrespective of prior experience with crime:

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Table 2. OLS Regression models predicting crime perceptions

<i>Variables</i>	B (SE)	Beta
Trust in Law & Justice Institutions	.463 (.028) ^{***}	.386 ^{***}
Crime Victimization	.023 (.071)	.012
Trust in Law & Justice Inst. (X) Crime Victimization	-.068 (.045)	.057
<i>Constant</i>	1.972 (.047) ^{***}	
R-Square	.138	

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; p values computed for two-tailed significance tests

A third model – trust in media vs. crime perceptions (see *Table 3*) – was even closer in similarity to Model 2 (R = .323; p <.001); South Africans with higher trust in the media are somewhat more positive in their perceptions on the status of crime in the country (beta = .334; p <.001), and again with no significant additional influence from prior crime victimization:

Table 3. OLS Regression models predicting crime perceptions

<i>Variables</i>	B (SE)	Beta
Trust in Media	.440 (.033) ^{***}	.334 ^{***}
Crime Victimization	.045 (.095)	.024
Trust in Media (X) Crime Victimization	-.053 (.051)	.054
<i>Constant</i>	1.800 (.066) ^{***}	
R-Square	.103	

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; p values computed for two-tailed significance tests

Finally, the last and weakest model discovered (see *Table 4*) revealed a very weak but statistical significant correlation (R = .124; p <.001):

Table 4. OLS Regression models predicting crime perceptions

Variables

	B (SE)	Beta
Social Trust	.134 (.032) ^{***}	.103 ^{***}
Crime Victimization	-.123 (.086)	-.064
Social Trust (X) Crime Victimization	.013 (.052)	.011
<i>Constant</i>	2.402 (.058) ^{***}	
R-Square	.014	

^{***}p<.001; ^{**}p<.01; ^{*}p<.05; p values computed for two-tailed significance tests

While it can be noted that South Africans with high social trust are slightly more likely to carry more positive crime perceptions (beta = .103; p <.001), this relationship was weak enough to question singular applicability towards explaining perceptions of crime. In fact, the same could be said for Models 2 and 3 as well given their comparatively weak magnitudes. Only the first model – trust in government regressed against crime perceptions – seemed strong enough to offer any confidence in explaining crime perspectives amongst South African residents.

Accordingly, additional consideration was given to the effect of all four trust measures as a single model with respect to crime perceptions. When all four measures of trust were combined into one model, the effect of media trust and social trust were nullified; they were no longer statistically significant (see *Table 5*). However, government trust (beta = .404; p < .001) and trust in law and justice institutions (beta = .174; p <.001) remained positive and significant in the model. In addition, when compared to the strongest single model in the study (trust in government → crime perceptions crime), the overall model gained slightly in strength (R = .511; p < .001; 26% of variance explained):

Somewhat surprisingly, when incorporating crime victimization experience into this analysis, no additional explanations or improvements to the trust-perception models were observed. Thus, crime victimization was excluded in the combined model illustrated in *Table 5*, and the finding seems to contradict prevailing evidence suggesting those previously victimized by crime harbor more negative perceptions of crime (Box, Hale et al. 1988; Zarafonitou 2000; Zarafonitou 2002; Tseloni and Zarafonitou 2008). Yet, there is support that such perceptions are weakly correlated with victimization when defined as “fear of crime” (Quann and Hung 2002; Tseloni and Zarafonitou 2008).

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Table 5. Combined OLS regression models predicting crime perceptions (Crime Victimization excluded)

Variables

	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beeta	B (SE)	Beta
Trust in Government	.496 (.038)** *	.404** *						
Trust in Law & Justice Institutions			.201 (.032)** *	.174** *				
Trust in Media					-.012 (.038))	- .01 0		
Social Trust							-.026 (.029))	- .02 1
Constant	1.594 (.066)** *							
R-Square	.259							

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; p values computed for two-tailed significance tests

Additionally, the specification of trust as the predictor of crime perceptions in the models tested may be a key distinction here. Halpern (2001) notes several complexities between individual measures of social trust when regressed against victimization rates and values of moral self-interest (i.e., keeping money you have found, cheating on taxes) and economic inequality. His findings seem to imply that social trust is merely one of several factors in a multivariate model of victimization, and accordingly victimization may need to be restructured to account for multiple influential factors Halpern (or other scholars) have found before victimization can be incorporated into models such as those tested in this study.

Discussion

It was anticipated in this study that trust, in its many variations, would be positively correlated with crime perceptions among South Africans. Indeed, this study offers some confirmation this is so, but only conditionally. While it can be concluded that higher trust implies more positive perceptions of crime status in the country, and lower trust similarly correlates with lower opinions, this relationship holds true mainly for government and institutions of law and justice. Perhaps the underlying indication here is the status of crime and effectiveness of

crime control is believed to be largely the domain of the government and formal institutions directly associated with establishing and maintaining order in the country. South Africans may very well believe that if the country is generally safe and free from violence, this is a result of the government and designated law enforcement entities performing their duties properly. Consequently, this belief engenders trust amongst South Africans that government, law, and justice entities in the country are competent in this respect, and will continue to be so. Conversely, if the perception is that society is more violent and privy to crime, South Africans may lose such trust and place blame in poor governance and mismanagement of those resources intended to control crime.

Additionally, it may be that the value of this study's findings is recognition of a greater need for further research on the nature and relevance of trust in South African communities. For instance, where there is lack of trust in the government amongst the citizenry, could it be that South Africans are still struggling to move forward from the dark past of apartheid, where latent trust issues stemming from the time period have yet to be addressed? Consider that government-funded institutions like schools, medical facilities, and law enforcement agencies operate best when citizens show their trust and active support, yet historically under apartheid were severely imbalanced in favor of the more privileged minority of South Africans. If citizens are mistrustful of these institutions in post – apartheid South Africa, surely participation in these institutions will be strained.

Since its end in 1994, it stands to reason the effects of apartheid still remain in South Africa in the form of emotional and cognitive damage endured from deeply entrenched processes of poverty, racism, and violence. Survivors of apartheid across all ages – some now parents and grandparents of the current generation of young people – suffered immeasurably during this era. Particularly with children from this era, a litany of inadequately treated psychological disorders plague them as they adapt to a new society free from such oppression (Hickson & Kriegler, 1991). The adjustment to such change is a stressor in and of itself, but the subsequent lack of trust these individuals may carry is especially problematic. Some of them vividly recall and understand all too well how the government forced segregation upon the Black majority and fueled the seeds of mistrust in the government. As noted in Goenjian et al. (2005), children who have experienced trauma during the apartheid era are at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder and depressive symptoms, for which mistrust in government entities is arguably just one manifestation. Rampant institutionalized corruption and discrimination bred a pervasive lack of trust toward the government and widespread excesses of stress, and is a likely culprit hindering social advancement in the country today.

Be that as it may, no research project is without flaws and researchers in this study recognized a number of potential problems mostly deemed unavoidable due to the nature of performing secondary analysis on existing data. One such

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flaw was the lack of precedence in applying elements of social capital theory in South African communities. As previously mentioned, there are not nearly as many studies of social capital outside of Western settings. Therefore, while it is assumed in this study that conventional interpretations of the concept are valid, a lack of examples specific to South Africa means less awareness of any “unique” analytical difficulties that might result from nuances of social life in the country requiring a different conceptualization of social capital.

On another note concerning conceptualization, trust correlates with numerous other social capital components like civic engagement and community participation (Lederman, Loayza et al. 2001; Messner, Rosenfeld et al. 2004), and this is important given how social capital is typically defined and measured as more than a single element. Social capital needs to be studied as a composite of variables, as more simplistic attempts to measure it are likely to fail (Lederman, Loayza et al. 2001). Even Coleman's seminal research implies multiple forms of social capital and illustrates how they make communal action possible (Coleman 1990; Lederman, Loayza et al. 2001).

However, the Afrobarometer data available for this research was limited in additional measures of social capital. For instance, preliminary data analysis revealed a lack of survey variables addressing the concept of reciprocity. Civic engagement was conceptually ambiguous in that it could be argued within the original survey variables that civic engagement is either negatively correlated with crime opinions (i.e., with more negative opinions on crime, South Africans might feel more inclined to participate in their respective communities and/or government institutions as a means of addressing the crime problems they perceive) or positively aligned (i.e., more negative opinions on crime may be a symptom of overall discontent with society, thus resulting in lower proclivity towards civic engagement).

Another noted flaw concerns the temptation for presumptive causation inherent in many social capital-crime studies. It is unlikely that social capital nor any component of it will in and of itself cause one's view of crime to be more or less positive. Causation “leaps” of this nature need to be managed in both the current and any future iteration of this study, along with any assumptions that social capital has a generally reductive effect on crime; several important studies reveal this is not always the case (Portes and Landholt 1996; Portes 1998; Forrest and Kearns 2001; Morenoff, Sampson et al. 2001; Browning, Feinberg et al. 2004)

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