



Article

Mismatch between lower performance and higher trust in the civil service: Can culture provide an explanation?

International Political Science Review

2020, Vol. 41(2) 192–206

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0192512118799756

journals.sagepub.com/home/ips



Hasan Muhammad Baniamin

University of Bergen, Norway

Ishtiaq Jamil

University of Bergen, Norway

Steinar Askvik

University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

The existing literature on institutional trust leads us to expect that institutional trust is determined by institutional performance. In the context of three South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka), we find the opposite – that despite poor performance of the civil service, there is high institutional trust. In this study we examine whether such mismatch can be explained by an authoritarian cultural orientation, which generates unquestioning obedience and loyalty and may contribute to inflated institutional trust in the civil service of these countries.

Keywords

Civil service, culture, governance, performance, trust, South Asia

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine whether an authoritarian cultural orientation can explain high levels of trust in the civil service in three South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. An ‘authoritarian cultural orientation’ means that people are inclined to respect authorities

Corresponding author:

Hasan Muhammad Baniamin, Department of Administration and Organisation Theory, University of Bergen, Post Box: 7802, Bergen, 5007, Norway.

Email: hasan.baniamin@uib.no

and accept large power distance. A previous study noted that trust in public institutions in Bangladesh is quite high, despite frequent criticism of inefficiency, corruption and discrimination on the part of public office holders (Askvik and Jamil, 2013). This is paradoxical, in so far as the existing literature leads us to expect that institutional performance will be the main determinant of institutional trust. A number of studies confirm that there is a positive correlation between citizens' satisfaction with public services and citizens' trust in public institutions (Bouckaert and van de Walle, 2003; Salminen and Ikola-Norrbäck, 2010; Zhao and Hu, 2015). Better performance by public institutions attracts higher trust (van de Walle et al., 2008). Thus, we would expect that low institutional performance in these three South Asian countries will produce low institutional trust. Yet this is not the case.

One explanation for the gap between expected and observed institutional trust may be the existence of large power distance in South Asia. Following Hofstede et al. (2010: 61), 'power distance' refers to how members of a specific culture accept large power distance and inequality in society. In Bangladesh, respect for authority and acceptance of hierarchy stand out as important social values (Jamil, 2007). Referring to this as a case of authoritarian cultural orientation, we speculate whether such a type of authoritarian culture may promote high trust in public and political institutions even in the contexts of low institutional performance. Thus, the research question we address in this article is whether high authoritarian cultural orientation leads to high institutional trust regardless of institutional performance.

In order to simplify the empirical analysis, we focus on trust in one particular institution, the civil service, and we use survey data from three South Asian countries: Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. We expect these countries to have in common an authoritarian culture. The development of the civil service system in South Asia in general and particularly in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, stems from British colonial rule. Admittedly, Nepal has never been a colony, but the development of the Nepalese civil service has been significantly influenced by the Indian Civil Service, which also has a colonial root. What is most characteristic of this service is the centralisation of authority and a recruitment system making it an elite service. Despite reduced elitism over the years as a result of administrative reforms, some of which are inspired by new public managerial ideas, hierarchy is still a strong feature of the civil service system (Jamil et al., 2013).

How to explain institutional trust?

Performance-based trust

As noted above, the main factor usually used to explain institutional trust is 'performance' (Askvik et al., 2011; Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Rohrschneider and Schmitt-Beck, 2002; van de Walle et al., 2008). This 'performance-based' trust explanation is rooted in 'rational choice' theory (Wong et al., 2011). It is argued that actors calculate social transactions based on analysing costs and benefits. When an institution performs better than it used to do, it will attract higher institutional trust than it used to (Campbell, 2004).

While the performance-based explanation is largely concerned about output or results to account for institutional trust, van Ryzin (2011) argues that 'processes' of service delivery can be even more important than the outcome itself. In this regard, fairness, equity, respect and honesty are especially important. People even accept outcomes that go against them when the process is fair, for instance when getting a traffic ticket or losing a court case. Rothstein and Teorell (2008) also emphasise this process dimension for building trust. In their findings, an impartial environment is considered the main requirement to ensure 'quality of government'. The existence of corruption (Salminen and Ikola-Norrbäck, 2010) and the poor treatment of citizens by civil servants may negatively affect the level of trust an institution receives.

Levi (1998) connects these attributes to the trustworthiness of institutions, trustworthiness that is related to the behaviour of the institutional agent. Kim (2005) defines such 'trustworthiness' as the characteristics of the object of trust and identifies five main characteristics: credible commitments, benevolence, honesty, competence, and fairness. These characteristics are also associated with the services provided by the civil servants. Whether civil servants are honest, competent, and committed matters a lot for the services they provide. Thus, 'service delivery processes' can be another important factor for determining the degree of trust in civil service. There can be certain behaviours of civil servants (like promptness, helpfulness, equal treatment, following rules and regulations) that can be considered as 'service-enabling processes'. When civil servants possess these service-enabling attributes, they are supposed to provide better and more satisfactory service and accordingly, may attract trust. On the other hand, there can be certain attributes of civil servants (like corruption, serving personal interests instead of those of the citizens, inaccessibility, nepotism) that can be considered as 'service-impeding processes'. Because of the negative effect of these factors on the services provided, they are most likely to have a negative effect on trust in the civil service.

Authoritarian culture-based trust

Opposing the 'performance-based approach', there is also a 'culturalist' camp arguing that rational calculations are not made on neutral and unmediated grounds (Wong et al., 2011). From this perspective, trust in political institutions is exogenous, originating outside the political sphere. It is rooted in cultural norms and communicated through early-life socialisation (Mishler and Rose, 2001). The idea is that national culture may differ from one country to another or between different regions.

Recently Ma and Yang (2014) proposed 'authoritarian orientation' as a possible cultural factor for explaining high institutional trust in East Asian countries. They associate an authoritarian culture with unquestioning obedience and reliance on authorities such as the government, political leaders, teachers, elders or anyone with a higher social rank and reputation. As an ordinary citizen, one is expected to pay respect to such authorities and not to challenge their judgements and actions. These cultural orientations are deeply rooted in Asian societies where paternalism and authoritarianism are widespread. Especially in Chinese culture, Confucian traditions emphasise that children's loyalty to the parents and the family is vital, and such values extend to the public sphere; loyalty to the king and the state has also become critical. Ma (2007) argued that in traditional culture, political leaders and governments have an 'important symbolic authoritative' status (in Wong et al., 2011). In hierarchical culture, individuals and the state have a 'hierarchical relationship' rather than a 'reciprocal relationship' (Shi, 2001). In many cases the logic of reciprocity, which is the main focus of rational choice theory, is suppressed by the logic of hierarchy. Outside China, in different East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, the authoritarian orientation is also strong – although some observers claim that, these days, the culture is about to change (Welzel and Dalton, 2017).

In South Asian countries, Confucianism is not a dominant doctrine like in East Asian countries, but hierarchy plays a dominant role. In Bangladesh, for example, *samajik bidhi* or *babosthya* (societal norms and forms) indicate that society in Bangladesh is hierarchical; relationships are defined by a person's social position, caste, status, education background, seniority and gender (Jamil, 2007). These rules indicate the ways of addressing and speaking to a person, ways of looking at the person, and even standing and sitting in front of a person. It defines the issues that a poor person can take to a person with higher status, and how to praise and show support for the powerful and the rich (Jansen, 1990).

According to Ma and Yang (2014: 328), pervasive hierarchical or authoritarian values may boost institutional trust. Resulting from fundamental social learning processes, such values are stable over time. Children learn from parents and other family members: and at school they are told by teachers how to identify and respect authorities. Similarly, adults learn what is expected from them in all types of relationships where social power and status is involved. This also implies that they learn to respect and trust central political institutions and their representatives. Ma and Yang (2014) set out to test such an argument by analysing information from 13 East Asian countries. Using survey data from the Asian Barometer (2001–2003 and 2005–2008), they constructed political trust as their dependent variable and authoritarianism as their main independent variable. They found that at macro level, ‘societies with high levels of authoritarian orientations will have higher political trust’ and ‘those societies which are less developed (and less democratic) will have stronger authoritarian orientations’ (Ma and Yang, 2014). At the individual level, pooling all observations from 13 countries, they demonstrated that respondents with high score on authoritarianism were more inclined to trust political institutions, yet, certain performance variables had an even stronger impact on political trust. Hence, both types of conditions are relevant for explaining variations in political trust.

Social capital-based trust

Another important contributor, Robert Putnam (1993, 2001), uses ‘social capital’ to explain variation in institutional trust. This aspect of culture is usually understood through the degree of generalised social trust and the degree of civic engagement or associationism (Newton, 2001). People with higher generalised trust may have higher institutional trust. However, there can also be a reverse causality, for instance, when public institutions discriminate between citizens and such practice results in weakened generalised trust, which in turn negatively affects institutional trust. The second aspect, the degree of civic engagement, means citizens can enter into partnership with institutions in ways that contribute to increasing the level of institutional trust. Both aspects, considered together, may reflect the degree of ‘social capital’ in a society. However, this link is neither widely nor empirically established in studies. Yet, some scholars find support in favour of this argument (Fukuyama, 1995, 2001; Newton and Norris, 2000) whereas others find little or no significant relationship (Askvik, 2007; Bäck and Kestilä, 2009; Newton, 2001; Rohrschneider and Schmitt, 2002), or even a negative relationship (Kim, 2005). Therefore, it seems that these two aspects of culture may be unsuitable or insufficient in many countries as explanatory factors for institutional trust. The civic associationism and mutual reciprocity claimed by Putnam to generate trust may not do so in societies with an authoritarian cultural orientation. These are civic virtues that are likely to develop in democracies or at least in matured democracies. On the other hand, in South Asia, respect for power and authority breed loyalty and obedience to institutions and persons who can exercise and possess these virtues. Therefore, it is expected that an authoritarian cultural orientation will generate trust in institutions.

Research design

On the basis of the above discussions of performance, authoritarian cultural orientation, and social capital-based trust, we intend to examine the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a). Service-enabling characteristics of the civil servants generate trust in the civil service.

Table 1. Confidence in the civil service, position in HDI and in CPI for the sample three South Asian countries.

Sample countries (year: 2014–2015)	Valid samples ^a	% Confidence ^b	Position in HDI among 188 countries (year: 2015) ^c	Position in CPI among 168 countries (year: 2015) ^d
Bangladesh	2477	73	142	139
Nepal	2151	70	145	130
Sri Lanka	1581	66	73	83

Source: GoT 2 survey (2014–2015), UNDP (2015) and Transparency International TI (2015).

^a'don't know' is excluded.

^b% showing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in civil service.

^cHDI by UNDP (2015) has coverage of 188 countries.

^dCPI by Transparency International (TI) (2015) has coverage of 168 countries and for both HDI and CPI; higher position means better performance.

CPI: Corruption Perceptions Index; HDI: Human Development Index.

Hypothesis 1b (*H1b*). Service-impeding characteristics of the civil servants generate distrust in the civil service.

Hypothesis 2 (*H2*). Higher authoritarian cultural orientation will lead to higher institutional trust in the civil service of the selected countries.

Hypothesis 3 (*H3*). Stronger social capital in society will enhance higher institutional trust in the civil service.

At the outset, we do not assume that the said hypotheses are mutually exclusive. Rather we are open to the possibility that each of them to some extent may be valid.

Our analysis for the three South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka – is based on survey data about citizens' evaluations of public institutions (here, the civil service). The reasons for selecting these three countries are both scientific and practical. All these countries demonstrate higher institutional trust despite poor performance and weak governance (Table 1). And from previous studies, we can find that our sample countries are characterised by hierarchical cultural traits such as patron-client relationships (Jamil et al., 2013; Neher, 1994), political exclusion (Lawoti, 2005), and the centralisation of authority (Riaz and Basu, 2010). These traits indicate a similar hierarchical social order that may influence institutional trust in these countries and provide support for our arguments. The practical aspect for selecting the sample countries is the existence of the Governance and Trust Survey 2 (GoT 2), conducted in these three countries as part of a research project to strengthen education and research capacity in institutions of higher learning in these countries.¹

The GoT 2 survey, which was conducted in the period 2014–15, includes variables measuring institutional performance, social capital and authoritarian cultural orientation, and trust in civil service. Our dependent variable, trust in civil service, is measured by the following question: 'Could you tell me how much confidence you have in the civil service: is it a great deal of confidence (4), quite a lot of confidence (3), not very much confidence (2), none at all (1)?'

The survey has country representative samples in all the three countries. First, in order to measure the effect of performance on trust (*H1a* and *H1b*), inspired by van Ryzin (2011), we analysed the service-delivery process, which is divided into two groups: (a) service-enabling processes, and (b) service-impeding processes.

For the service-enabling processes, the respondents were asked to assess civil servants on the basis of a number of statements such as 'Civil servants are "Prompt and efficient," "Helpful and

responsive,” “Treat everyone equally,” and “Discharge duties according to rules.” These four statements represent ‘service-enabling processes’ that can enhance confidence in the civil service. The variables indicate positive service delivery attitudes of the civil servants.

In contrast, five statements represent ‘service-impeding processes’ – ‘Civil Servants are “Corrupt,” “Serve personal interests only,” “Difficult to get access to,” “Not fully aware of responsibilities,” and “Act on nepotism.”’ These represent some negative attributes related to service delivery processes and bureau pathologies that may reduce citizens’ confidence in the civil service. For both service-enabling processes and service-impeding processes, answer alternatives vary from 1 to 4, where 1 represents ‘strongly disagree’ and 4 indicates ‘strongly agree’.

Second, to measure authoritarian cultural orientation in these three countries (H2), an index is computed on the basis of two statements: (a) ‘Even if parents’ demands are unreasonable, children still should do what their parents ask/suggest’, and (b) ‘It is natural that those with power and money and who belong to a family with high status should be respected and obeyed’. The answer alternatives vary from 1 to 4, where 1 represents ‘strongly disagree’ and 4 ‘strongly agree’. An additive index is created to measure authoritarian cultural orientation. Higher value in this index indicates higher authoritarian orientation. These kinds of indicators are used in other studies as well to measure similar cultural orientation (like Ma and Yang, 2014).

Finally, along with these explanatory variables, the study also includes two other cultural variables that are commonly used to explain trust. These are ‘generalised trust’ and ‘associationism’ based on Putnam’s concept of social capital. ‘Generalised trust’ is measured by the question of whether most people can be trusted (coded as 1) or whether it is important to be careful when dealing with people (coded as 2). ‘Associationism’ is measured by whether a particular respondent is associated with any social, voluntary, civil society, and community organisations. (‘Yes’ is coded as 1 and ‘No’ is coded as 2).

Findings

First, the study tried to identify the level of trust in the civil service of the respective countries. From Table 1, it appears that the trust level of the three South Asian countries is quite high despite low performance and poor governance. The highest trust among the three countries is in Bangladesh (73 per cent).

To explore possible explanations of such higher trust in the civil service of the sample countries, we first examined correlations (Pearson’s r) between the key variables. From Table 2, it appears that all the variables are significantly correlated with confidence in the civil service. This suggests that some kinds of systematic relationships may exist. In particular, authoritarian cultural orientation and service-enabling process variables are positively correlated with the citizens’ confidence in the civil service. Similarly, between authoritarian cultural orientation and trust in civil service, we find $r = 0.229$ and $p < 0.01$. Indicators of service-enabling processes also show positive correlations. On the other hand, service-impeding processes can affect citizens’ trust in the civil service adversely, as its indicators reveal negative correlations. The highest negative correlation value is with the degree of corruption ($r = -0.113$ and $p < 0.01$). The variable ‘Satisfied with life’ is also positively correlated as $r = 0.139$ and $p < 0.01$. Table 2 also presents the correlation coefficients between the different explanatory variables. As they are not that strong (most of them are less than 0.30 or around that value), we discard the problem of ‘multicollinearity’ and include all these variables in the regression model to find out which of these affect the dependent variable (confidence and trust in the civil service; Table 3).

Following the hypotheses presented above, the study tests the effects of three sets of explanatory variables in order to explain the degree of citizens’ trust in the civil service. The first set is

Table 2. Correlation coefficients of the main variables of the study (pooled sample).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Confidence in civil service	2.77	0.718	1											
Service-enabling processes														
2. Civil servants: prompt and efficient	2.48	0.808	0.274**	1										
3. Civil servants: helpful and responsive	2.43	0.742	0.218**	0.405**	1									
4. Civil servants: treat everyone equally	2.06	0.851	0.176**	0.290**	0.338**	1								
5. Civil servants: discharge duties according to rule	2.48	0.773	0.211**	0.321**	0.368**	0.327**	1							
Service-impeding processes														
6. Civil servants: corrupt	2.80	0.819	-0.113**	-0.102**	-0.148**	-0.144**	-0.141**	1						
7. Civil servants: serve personal interests only	2.90	0.812	-0.094**	-0.076**	-0.123**	-0.142**	-0.121**	0.546**	1					
8. Civil servants: difficult to get access to	2.76	0.827	-0.045**	0.007	-0.058**	-0.086**	-0.012	0.293**	0.348**	1				
9. Civil servants: not fully aware of responsibilities	2.51	0.804	-0.040**	-0.065**	-0.138**	0.019	-0.083**	0.315**	0.295**	0.277**	1			
10. Civil servants: act on nepotism	3.06	0.787	-0.070**	-0.059**	-0.136**	-0.180**	-0.083**	0.288**	0.315**	0.285**	0.278**	1		
Other variables														
11. Satisfied with life	5.55	1.59	0.139**	0.177**	0.101**	0.069**	0.087**	-0.028*	-0.041**	-0.015	-0.021	0.024	1	
Culture														
12. Authoritarian cultural orientation	2.27	0.942	0.229**	0.258**	0.197**	0.148**	0.180**	0.110**	0.099**	0.138**	0.131**	-0.021	0.076**	1

**p < 0.01 and *p < 0.05 (two-tailed tests).
SD: standard deviation.

Table 3. Summary of the linear regression models of confidence/trust in civil service in three South Asian countries (standardised beta coefficients).

	Pooled sample	Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
Process of service delivery				
Service-enabling processes (low–high)				
Civil servants: prompt and efficient	0.140*	0.152*	0.085***	0.225*
Civil servants: helpful and responsive	0.051**	0.122*	0.017	–0.011
Civil servants: treat everyone equally	0.047***	0.091*	0.135*	0.047
Civil servants: discharge duties according to rule	0.085*	0.081**	0.059	0.059
Service-impeding processes (low–high)				
Civil servants: corrupt	–0.110*	–0.103*	–0.104**	0.003
Civil servants: serve personal interests only	–0.024	–0.026	–0.016	–0.063
Civil servants: difficult to get access to	–0.048**	–0.039	–0.041	0.030
Civil servants: not fully aware of responsibilities	–0.007	–0.079**	–0.038	–0.043
Civil servants: act on nepotism	0.016	–0.069***	–0.041	NA
Culture				
Social capital				
Generalised trust (1 = Yes and 2 = No)	–0.020	–0.024	0.022	–0.006
Associationism (1 = Yes and 2 = No)	–0.010	–0.006	0.017	–0.004
Authoritarian cultural orientation (low–high)	0.163*	0.283*	0.081***	0.068***
Socio-economic factors				
Gender (reference: male)	–0.009	–0.019	–0.064***	–0.006
Age (low–high)	–0.024	–0.037	–0.075***	–0.023
Education (low–high)	0.069*	–0.012	0.007	–0.032
Monthly income (low–high)	NA	0.035	0.017	0.049
Satisfied with life (low–high)	0.098*	0.157*	0.152*	0.054***
Constant (unstandardised coefficients)	1.944*	1.829*	1.944*	2.051*
Adjusted R ²	0.150	0.196	0.078	0.098
N	6800	2748	2404	1648

Dependent variable: Trust in civil service.

*** $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

NA: Not available to compute.

related to the service-delivery processes of the civil service which, as explained above, is divided into service-enabling processes and service-impeding processes. The study finds support for the possible positive effect of all the service-enabling processes factors for the pooled sample (support for H1a). All the beta coefficients in the service-enabling processes group reveal statistically significant effects. It seems that ‘Prompt and efficient’ has the highest effect. This indicates that when people experience prompt and efficient service delivery by civil servants, they tend to trust the civil service more. The effect of this variable is significant in all the three countries and has the highest effect in Sri Lanka.

Among the five indicators of service-impeding processes, only two show statistically significant trends for the pooled sample: that is, ‘Corrupt’ and ‘Difficult to get access to’. Corruption seems to be the more prominent factor for the pooled model, and it negatively affects the level of trust in the civil service. At the country level, it demonstrates negative effects in Bangladesh and Nepal, but it does not reveal any significant relationship in Sri Lanka. Thus, the effects of the two indicators of service-impeding processes on trust in civil service provide partial support for H1b.

The next sets of independent variables refer to culture. Two kinds of cultural orientation (authoritarian cultural orientation and social capital) are addressed based on three indicators (generalised trust, associationism, and authoritarian cultural orientation). Among the cultural variables, only the authoritarian cultural orientation is found to have a statistically significant impact on trust in civil service, as $\beta = 0.163$ and $p < 0.001$ for the pooled sample. This factor has the highest ' β ' value in the regression model and it is also significant at the country level in all three countries. According to this model, the effect of authoritarian cultural orientation is the highest in Bangladesh, followed by Nepal and Sri Lanka, respectively. These findings indicate support for H2 of this study and can provide an explanation of the main research puzzle of the study. The study does not find any statistically significant relationship between the indicators of social capital (generalised trust and associationism) and the trust in civil service; therefore, the current study rejects H3.

This study also assesses the effect of various socio-demographic variables on trust in civil service, but the possible causal mechanisms are unclear for some of these demographic attributes. For example, in Nepal, it seems that women have less trust in civil servants than do men, but in the other two countries, there is no statistically significant difference. It is impossible to infer from this study why Nepalese women are less trusting of the civil service than are men. In Nepal, it also seems that with the increase in age the trust level decreases, but this does not happen in the other countries. At the pooled level, education is statistically significant, but it does not show any significant trend at the country level. The monthly income variable does not show any statistically significant relationship.

Analysis and interpretation

A main interpretation of the findings is that different service-enabling processes such as 'promptness and efficiency', 'helpfulness and responsiveness', 'equal treatment' and 'discharging duties according to rules' have positive effects on the degree of trust in civil service. Alternatively, the study suggests that two service-impeding processes ('corruption' and 'difficulties to get access') have significant negative effects at the aggregate level (although, at the country level, the indicator 'difficulties to get access' does not show statistically significant effect in any country). The variable 'corruption' shows statistically significant effects in Bangladesh and Nepal but not in Sri Lanka. Hence, although not all indicators of service-enabling and service-impeding processes have significant effects on trust in the civil service, our main interpretation is that the observed patterns give support to our hypotheses H1(a) and H1(b). The effects of process variables support the 'quality of governance' thesis (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008) and they also provide support in favour of the performance-based findings by Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Rohrschneider and Schmitt-Beck, 2002. However, our measurement of performance is based on individual perceptions and not on objective measures such as the Human Development Index (HDI). Hence our indicators of institutional performance may have limited validity. An objective measure, like the HDI (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2015), show that the sample countries' performance is very low compared to other countries. Bangladesh is ranked as number 142, Nepal is number 145 and Sri Lanka is number 73 among the 188 countries covered by the statistics. Still, their institutional trust level is higher than many of the countries with significantly higher positions on the HDI.

The next finding of this study may provide an explanation for the existence of such inflated trust despite poor performance. It indicates that authoritarian cultural orientation can lead to higher trust in the civil service and provides evidence for the support of H2. We observe a similar effect as Ma and Yang (2014) report from their study, which shows that authoritarian orientation is an independent explanatory variable for political trust in 13 East Asian countries. Some of these East Asian countries are high performing and known to have better governance (like Singapore and Hong

Kong), and in those countries an authoritarian orientation further reinforces trust in civil service. Shi (2001) had similar findings when comparing the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. Ma (2007) claimed that in traditional culture, government and political leaders have important authoritative status in society (cited in Wong et al., 2011). This is referred to in China as *minbem* – the people-centric doctrine that gives the ruling elite the mandate to govern as part of their moral responsibility to look after the welfare of citizens and take care of their interests (Chu, 2013: 7). Due to the authoritative position of the ruling elite, people show respect and obedience and this may contribute to enhanced trust in public authorities. As argued by Bomhoff and Gu (2012) and Welzel and Dalton (2017), this may be labelled 'Asian values', although Asia is larger and more diverse than the Confucian-dominated countries (mostly comprising East and South-East Asia countries). From our study, it seems that similar hierarchical cultural values also exist in the selected South Asian countries. Welzel (2012) defined this as 'the myth of Asian exceptionalism' and predicted that, in the long run, there will be a change in these values. This will take place with the rise of assertive and empowered people acquiring higher levels of education and knowledge.

Regarding the 'social capital' hypothesis, however, the study does not find any statistically significant relationships between trust in the civil service and the other two dimensions of culture – 'generalised trust' and 'associationism'. The lack of significant effects both for the pooled sample and at country level suggests that H3 does not present a valid explanation of civil service trust in the sample countries. This seems to be consistent with the findings of Tan and Tambyah (2011) and Askvik (2007). According to Rothstein and Uslaner (2005), institutional design is more important in generating generalised/social trust. For instance, they claim that universal social policy programmes like those of the Scandinavian countries are more effective than means-tested programmes in generating generalised trust or social trust. This is because universal programmes are more redistributive than means-tested programmes, and helpful in creating economic equality and fair treatment of all. As the sample three South Asian countries lack such universal programmes and most programmes are means-tested, this may be why the study did not find significant relationship between social capital and institutional trust.

The study also explored the potential impact of some socio-demographic factors. Most of them did not affect the dependent variable. Yet, we found that with increased education, people tend to have higher institutional trust. Here research findings are mixed. In general, education develops a critical mind, and this may affect one's level of trust (Zhao and Hu, 2015) and lead to a decline in institutional trust. That will fit with the idea of critical citizens resulting from better education. However, in an earlier study, Christensen and Læg Reid (2005) argue that higher education enhances trust in government because it increases people's cognitive ability. From the present study, it is impossible to draw such a conclusion. The current study findings on education also contradict the findings of Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012); they showed that education has a negative effect on institutional trust in corrupt societies while it has a positive effect on institutional trust in clean societies. As the sample countries have a higher magnitude of corruption (Table 1), we expect education to have a negative effect on institutional trust. This is not the case. Yet another finding from this study, one which concerns the age factor in Nepal, contradicts Christensen and Læg Reid's assumption. They argue that older people are likely to have higher trust due to a collective orientation, but from the present study, it seems that older people tend to have less trust in civil service. A well-functioning welfare system in the Nordic countries may contribute to what Christensen and Læg Reid found there. Nepal, however, lacks the extensive welfare system that can often be observed in developed countries.

A main limitation of the study is of course that our observations are based on perceptions and correlations among perceptions. When we assume causal relationships between processes of service delivery and citizens' trust in civil service, we should also be open to the possibility that the

causal link may go the other way around. Thus, citizens' trust in the civil service may affect how citizens experience and characterise such processes. For instance, if citizens have learned through early socialisation processes in family and school to respect authorities, they may also be more inclined to attribute positive traits to the civil servants, such as 'prompt and efficient' or 'helpful and responsive' behaviour. Such an interpretation would also be consistent with the observed pattern in the data. To tell which interpretation is correct, we need a more sophisticated research design. As for now, we can only note that the findings are consistent with our primary hypothesis regarding the impact of authoritarian cultural orientation.

Yet, from a somewhat similar perspective of reversed causality, we can also speculate whether authoritarian cultural orientation has an indirect effect on trust in the civil service via many of the service-enabling variables. In particular, when we go back to Table 2, there appears to be a significant correlation between authoritarian cultural orientation and these variables. On the basis of the observed correlations, we can contemplate whether the presence of authoritarian cultural orientation can affect how respondents tend to assess the behaviour of civil servants. Thus, the more authoritarian values an individual is carrying, the more inclined s/he will be to assess civil servants in positive terms like 'prompt and efficient' or 'helpful and responsive'. By analysing different findings, Mauk (2017) also reported similar trends in East Asian countries where people committed to traditional societal values are more supportive of the regime than those with more modern and pro-democratic outlooks. However, there is one puzzle in Table 2: people with higher authoritarian cultural orientation tend to believe that civil servants are more corrupt or difficult to get access to, but at the same time, they also perceive civil servants as more prompt and efficient or helpful and responsive. This paradox may be explained by the fact that where systemic corruption is a fact of life – a rule rather than an exception – 'speed money' is quite commonly paid in order to get business done in public offices (Knox, 2009; Zafarullah and Huque, 2001). For many citizens, this is taken for granted and such payments expedite the decision-making process, for instance, for issuing a passport or driving license. It matters little *how* a decision is made; what counts is *how quickly* a decision is made.

Conclusion

This study is about sources of institutional trust in three South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Our starting point was the mismatch between low performance and high trust in the civil service of those countries. Using original survey data, we examined three hypotheses. Initially, our findings vindicate a well-established claim in the literature that institutional trust, such as trust in the civil service, results from institutional performance. These findings are in line with the rational choice theory of institutional trust (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Wong et al., 2011). However, the next finding is our main contribution; it shows that the nature of the calculation indicated by rational choice theory is mediated by cultural norms that can lead to inflated trust. The study demonstrates that an authoritarian cultural orientation in the sample countries affects trust in their civil service, regardless of institutional performance. This study also indicates that this cultural orientation can even affect perceived performance level; that is, people with higher authoritarian cultural orientation tend to have higher ratings on different performance indicators like the degree of efficiency of the civil servants. These would explain what we initially referred to as the mismatch between low institutional performance and high institutional trust. The results support the claim of Ma and Yang (2014) and Shi (2001) that authoritarian orientations are an important source of political trust in East Asia.

The consequence of authoritarian-based trust is that there may be less pressure on the ruling elite, who may exploit this obedience for their own gains, leading to poor governance. Askvik and

Jamil (2013: 473) make a similar argument; too much institutional trust in a political regime may be dysfunctional and lead to blind or naive trust, allowing the development of a 'political culture of negligence, arbitrariness, corruption, clientelism, and nepotism'. On the other hand, this obedience-based trust can also be beneficial for a country and convenient for government as there is less opposition. Combined with benevolent leadership, rapid socio-economic progress can be achieved. Some of the high performing East Asian countries (like Singapore, South Korea) may have benefited from such a cultural orientation. This allegiant culture is beneficial for output, that is, effective governance, whereas the assertive culture ensures better input, that is, accountable governance (Welzel and Dalton, 2017: 124).

With the increase of assertiveness due to an increasing level of education and knowledge, people's preference for accountable governance, all around the world, is also growing. This assertiveness is creating critical citizens and causing declining institutional trust in many developed countries (Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Welzel, 2012). Like other places, China is also showing some forms of declining institutional trust, although the people of China largely still have an allegiant nature. The development of assertive culture would be an interesting subject to pursue in the sample countries, but would require additional longitudinal studies.

The last hypothesis of the study was about the effect of social capital on institutional trust in the sample countries but the study found no significant correlation between the two. This is contrary to the theoretical and the empirical claims by prominent researchers on social capital and institutional trust, such as Putnam (1993, 2001) and Newton and Norris (2000). However, the finding of this study of the effect of social capital on institutional trust is consistent with a number of other studies claiming that the 'social capital' hypothesis is contestible (e.g. Askvik, 2007; Bäck and Kestilä, 2009; Newton, 2001; Rohrschneider and Schmitt, 2002).

In this study, the most interesting finding has been the effect of authoritarian cultural orientations on institutional trust. While the effect of institutional performance is well known in the research literature, supporting rational choice theory, less attention has been given to the role of factors like authoritarian culture in explaining institutional trust and the existence of higher institutional trust despite poor governance. This connection needs to be further explored in other contexts, particularly where there is higher institutional trust despite lower performance and poor governance.

Funding

There was no specific funding to conduct this study. The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation provided funding for the collection of data in the three countries as part of the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development.

Note

1. The GoT 2 survey was conducted under the project 'Policy and Governance Studies (PGS) in South Asia', a part of the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development. Articles based on the two waves of this survey (2008–2009 and 2014–2015) include Askvik et al. (2011), Jamil et al. (2016) and Baniamin and Jamil (2017).

References

- Asian Barometer (2001–2003 and 2005–2008) Asian Barometer Survey Data, Available online at: <http://www.asianbarometer.org/data/data-release>.
- Askvik, Steinar (2007) Political Regime and Popular Trust in the Civil Service: South Africa and Norway compared. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 9(1): 69–85.

- Askvik, Steinar and Ishtiaq Jamil (2013) The Institutional Trust Paradox in Bangladesh. *Public Organisation Review* 13(4): 459–476.
- Askvik, Steinar, Ishtiaq Jamil and Tek Nath Dhakal (2011) Citizens' Trust in Public and Political Institutions in Nepal. *International Political Science Review* 32(4): 417–437.
- Bäck, Maria and Elina Kestilä (2009) Social Capital and Political Trust in Finland: An individual-level assessment. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32(2): 171–194.
- Baniamin, Hasan Muhammad and Ishtiaq Jamil (2017). Dynamics of Corruption and Citizens' Trust in Anti-Corruption Agencies in Three South Asian Countries. *Public Organisation Review* 18(3): 381–398.
- Bomhoff, Eduard J and Mary Man-Li Gu (2012) East Asia Remains Different: A comment on the index of 'self-expression values', by Inglehart and Welzel. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 43(3): 373–383.
- Bouckaert, Geert and Steven van de Walle (2003) Quality of Public Service Delivery and Trust in Government. In Ari Salminen (ed) *Governing Networks: EGPA Yearbook*. Amsterdam: IOS Press, 299–318.
- Brehm, John and Wendy Rahn (1997) Individual-level Evidence for the Causes and Consequences of Social Capital. *American Journal of Political Science* 41(3): 999–1023.
- Campbell, William Ross (2004) The Sources of Institutional Trust in East and West Germany: Civic culture or economic performance? *German Politics* 13(3): 401–418.
- Christensen, Tom and Per Lægreid (2005) Trust in Government: The relative importance of service satisfaction, political factors and demography. *Public Performance & Management Review* 28(4): 487–511.
- Chu, Yun-Han (2013) Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate Over the Chinese Model. *China Review* 13(1): 1–42.
- Fukuyama, Francis (1995) *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks.
- Fukuyama, Francis (2001) Social Capital Civil Society and Development. *Third World Quarterly* 22(1): 7–20.
- Hakhverdian, Armen and Quinton Mayne (2012) Institutional Trust, Education, and Corruption: A micro-macro interactive approach. *The Journal of Politics* 74(3): 739–750.
- Hofstede, Geert, Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov (2010) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Inglehart, Ronald and Wayne E Baker (2000) Modernisation, Cultural Change and the Persistence of Traditional Values. *American Sociological Review* 65(1): 19–51.
- Jamil, Ishtiaq (2007) *Administrative Culture in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: AH Development Pub, House in association with Centre for Development Governance.
- Jamil, Ishtiaq, Steinar Askvik and Hasan Muhammad Baniamin (2016) Citizens' Trust in Anticorruption Agencies: A comparison between Bangladesh and Nepal. *International Journal of Public Administration* 39(99): 676–685.
- Jamil, Ishtiaq, Steinar Askvik and Tek Nath Dhakal (2013) Understanding Governance in South Asia. In Ishtiaq Jamil, Steinar Askvik and Tek Nath Dhakal (eds) *In Search of Better Governance in South Asia and Beyond*. New York: Springer, 13–36.
- Jansen, Eirik G (1990) Processes of Polarisation and the Breaking up of Patron-client Relationships in Rural Bangladesh. In Ole David Koht-Norbye (ed) *Bangladesh Faces the Future*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 21–34.
- Kim, Ji-Young (2005) 'Bowling Together' isn't a Cure-all: The relationship between social capital and political trust in South Korea. *International Political Science Review* 26(2): 193–213.
- Knox, Colin (2009) Building Trust Amidst Corruption in Bangladesh. *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 98(403): 449–459.
- Lawoti, Mahendra (2005) *Towards a Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Levi, Margaret (1998) A State of Trust. In Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi (eds) *Trust and Governance*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Ma, Deyong (2007) Institutional and Cultural Factors of Political Trust in Eight Asian Societies. *Comparative Economic and Social Systems* 5: 79–86 (in Chinese).
- Ma, Deyong and Feng Yang (2014) Authoritarian Orientations and Political Trust in East Asian Societies. *East Asia* 31(4): 323–341.

- Mauk, Marlene (2017) Fostering Support for Non-democratic Rule? *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 11(1): 24–49.
- Mishler, William and Richard Rose (2001) What are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing institutional and cultural theories in post-communist societies. *Comparative Political Studies* 34(1): 30–62.
- Neher, Clark D (1994) Asian Style Democracy. *Asian Survey* 34(11): 949–961.
- Newton, Kenneth (2001) Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society and Democracy. *International Political Science Review* 22(2): 201–214.
- Newton, Kenneth and Pippa Norris (2000) Confidence in Public Institutions Faith Culture or Performance? *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association*, 15 September 1999, Atlanta, USA. Available online at: <https://sites.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/NEWTON.PDF>
- Putnam, Robert D (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, Robert D (2001) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Riaz, Ali and Subho Basu (2010) *Paradise Lost? State Failure in Nepal*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Rohrschneider, Robert and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck (2002) Trust in Democratic Institutions in Germany: Theory and evidence ten years after unification. *German Politics* 11(3): 35–58.
- Rothstein, Bo and Jan Teorell (2008) What is Quality of Government? A theory of impartial government institutions. *Governance* 21(2): 165–190.
- Rothstein, Bo and Eric M Uslaner (2005) All for All: Equality, corruption, and social trust. *World Politics* 58(1): 41–72.
- Salminen, Ari and Rinna Ikola-Norrbäck (2010) Trust, Good Governance and Unethical Actions in Finnish Public Administration. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 23(7): 647–668.
- Shi, Tianjian (2001) Cultural Values and Political Trust: A comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. *Comparative Politics* 33(4): 401–419.
- Tan, Soo Jiuan and Siok Kuan Tambyah (2011) Generalised Trust and Trust in Institutions in Confucian Asia. *Social Indicators Research* 103(3): 357–377.
- Transparency International (TI) (2015) *Corruption Perceptions Index, 2015*. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2015#results-table>
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2015) *Human Development Index (HDI)*. Available at: <http://hdrundp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>
- van de Walle, Steven, Steven Van Roosbroek and Geert Bouckaert (2008) Trust in the public sector: is there any evidence for a long-term decline?. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 74(1): 47–64.
- van Ryzin, Gregg G (2011) Outcomes, Process and Trust of Civil Servants. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21(4): 745–760.
- Welzel, Christian (2012) The Myth of Asian Exceptionalism: Response to Bomhoff and Gu. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 43(7): 1039–1054.
- Welzel, Christian and Russell Dalton (2017) Cultural Change in Asia and Beyond: From allegiant to assertive citizens. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2(2): 112–132.
- Wong, Timothy Ka-ying, Po-san Wan and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao (2011) The Bases of Political Trust in Six Asian Societies: Institutional and cultural explanations compared. *International Political Science Review* 32(3): 263–281.
- Zafarullah, Habib and Ahmed Shafiqul Huque (2001) Public Management for Good Governance: Reforms, regimes, and reality in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Public Administration* 24(12): 1379–1403.
- Zhao, Dahai and Wei Hu (2015) Determinants of Public Trust in Government: Empirical evidence from urban China. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 83(2): 358–377.

Author biographies

Hasan Muhammad Baniamin is a PhD student in the Department of Administration and Organisation Theory, University of Bergen, Norway. His research interests include e-governance, corruption, health

policy, institutional performance, and trust and local governance, and he has published articles on these issues in journals such as *Public Organisation Review* and *International Journal of Public Administration*.

Ishtiaq Jamil is a professor in the Department of Administration and Organisation Theory, University of Bergen, Norway. His research interests include administrative culture, public policy, multi-level governance, and trust in public and political institutions.

Steinar Askvik is a professor at the Department of Administration and Organisation Theory, University of Bergen, Norway. His research interests include theories of institution building, social and political trust, organisational learning, and management in public administration.