

From Service Quality to Public Trust: Procedural Justice in Frontline Police Services

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Abstract

In the context of contemporary public administration, service quality is no longer understood solely as a matter of administrative efficiency or procedural compliance, but as a relational process that shapes citizens' experiences of the state itself. The purpose of this study is to examine how procedural justice shapes citizens' trust in frontline police services at the Gorontalo Regional Police Service Center (SPKT), Indonesia. This study employed a qualitative mechanism-based case study method, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. The findings suggest that trust is shaped less by the speed of service than by fairness of treatment, clarity of procedures, consistency of interactions, and visible complaint handling. This study identifies an administrative legitimacy gap and argues that police service quality should be understood as justice-based service legitimacy, not merely administrative performance.

Keywords

frontline governance, institutional trust, procedural justice, police legitimacy, public service quality



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INTRODUCTION

Public service is the most visible interface between the state and citizens, as it is through service that the public assesses the capacity, integrity, and legitimacy of government institutions. In the context of contemporary public administration, service quality is no longer understood solely as a matter of administrative efficiency or procedural compliance, but as a relational process that shapes citizens' experiences with the state itself. Osborne (2021) explains that public service must be understood through public service logic, namely as a process of creating public value that arises from the interaction between institutions and service users, not just from organizational output. This perspective places citizen experience as a central element in assessing the success of public services.

In the police sector, public service occupies a far more sensitive position than in other administrative sectors because it concerns legal protection, a sense of security, and the legitimacy of the use of state authority. The police are not only law enforcement organizations but also representatives of the state that most directly interact with the public in situations of uncertainty, conflict, or need for protection. Tyler and Jackson (2014) emphasize that police legitimacy is not primarily built through coercive capacity or the effectiveness of law enforcement, but through public perceptions of fairness, neutrality, respect, and procedural justice in everyday interactions. Thus, the quality of police services is a crucial foundation for building public trust in state institutions.

In the context of police services, poor service quality not only leads to administrative dissatisfaction but can also develop into distrust in the legal institution more broadly. Murphy, Madon, and Cherney (2021) show that when citizens feel unfairly treated, disrespected, or lack procedural clarity, trust in the police declines even when formal service outcomes are still delivered. Conversely, services that respect citizen dignity and foster a sense of procedural fairness can increase willingness to cooperate, compliance, and institutional trust. Therefore, police public services must be understood as an arena for establishing state legitimacy, not simply a service administration space.

In Indonesia, police bureaucratic reform has driven various efforts to improve the quality of public services, including digitizing services, strengthening standard operating procedures, increasing transparency, and evaluating public satisfaction. Formally, various service indicators show significant improvements. According to a Kompas Research and Development survey, public trust in the Indonesian National Police (Polri) increased from 66% in August 2023 to 71.6% in December 2023, and reached 73.1% in June 2024. This data indicates an improvement in public perception of the police institution nationally. However, this increase does not fully reflect the service experience at the frontline level, particularly in operational units such as the Police Service Unit (SPKT).

A similar situation is evident in the context of police services in Gorontalo. The Gorontalo Ombudsman Representative's report shows that most police public service units are in the green zone with a high quality category, such as the Bone Bolango Police, Gorontalo City Police, and Gorontalo Police. However, there are still several service units that are in the yellow zone with moderate quality, including in aspects of SPKT services and certain administrative services. These findings indicate that compliance with formal standards does not always result in a satisfactory service experience for the public, especially in aspects of responsiveness, clarity of procedures, comfort of service, and consistency of officer treatment.

This phenomenon highlights a crucial paradox in the study of police public service: formal service indicators may improve, but public trust does not always grow linearly. Administratively sound services do not necessarily translate into institutional legitimacy if citizens' experiences demonstrate procedural injustice, unclear processes, or unequal treatment. Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2021) explain that the relationship between service performance and public trust is not automatic, as trust is shaped more by perceptions of

fairness and institutional encounters than simply service output. This is a fundamental issue in police public service reform.

Research on public service within the Indonesian police force also shows a similar trend. Most studies focus on public satisfaction, procedural effectiveness, or evaluation of service infrastructure, but have not explicitly explained how procedural justice shapes public trust in the police institution. Studies by Sahrani (2024), Paulani et al. (2024), and Rachmad and Pramono (2024) emphasize the importance of responsiveness and excellent service, but still position trust as an administrative consequence, rather than a relational outcome of citizens' experiences in the service process. Consequently, the relationship between service quality and institutional legitimacy remains inadequately explained.

Based on these conditions, this study proposes a theoretical reframing from service quality to procedural justice as the primary mechanism for building public trust. Procedural justice theory explains that citizens judge the legitimacy of an institution not only from the final outcome of the service, but also from how the service process occurs whether they are treated fairly, given the opportunity to express their opinions, receive clear explanations, and are respected as citizens (Tyler & Jackson, 2014; Trinkner & Tyler, 2016). In the context of police services, procedural justice is a missing mechanism that explains why good formal services do not necessarily generate trust.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a mechanism-based case study design to explain how procedural justice shapes public trust in frontline policing services. Rather than measuring statistical relationships, it focuses on uncovering causal processes linking service experiences to trust or distrust. Drawing on a constructivist-institutional perspective, trust is understood as a product of citizens' perceptions of fairness, neutrality, respectful treatment, procedural clarity, and opportunities for voice. This approach is suitable for capturing how micro-level interactions contribute to broader outcomes such as institutional trust and public legitimacy.

The research selects the SPKT (Integrated Police Service Center) of Polda Gorontalo as a critical case, as it represents the primary point of contact between citizens and the police. Using a critical case logic, the study assumes that if procedural justice mechanisms operate strongly in this setting, the findings can offer broader theoretical insights into policing services. Empirically, the case is relevant due to the observed gap between formally adequate service performance and persistent public complaints regarding inconsistency, lack of clarity, and perceived unfairness in service delivery.

Data are collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to ensure triangulation and robust evidence. Interviews involve police officers, frontline staff, and service users, focusing on service experiences, perceptions of fairness, and trust formation. Observations capture real-time interactions, communication patterns, and informal practices, while document analysis examines SOPs, evaluation reports, and public

service records. This combination allows comparison between formal service design and citizens' lived experiences.

The analysis applies thematic mechanism tracing, integrating grounded theory coding with causal process reconstruction. It proceeds through open, axial, and selective coding to identify key themes such as procedural clarity, neutrality, and institutional confidence, followed by tracing how these elements interact to produce trust outcomes. Validity is ensured through triangulation, pattern matching, contradiction analysis, and analytical transparency. Overall, the study moves beyond description to explain how procedural justice functions as a core mechanism in building institutional trust in frontline policing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Fairness Beyond Speed: Citizens Judge Service by How They Are Treated

The first finding indicates that the quality of service at the Gorontalo Regional Police Service Center (SPKT) is not solely determined by the speed of service, but primarily by how citizens are treated. Citizens are more accepting of delays if officers provide clear explanations, are polite, and provide equal service. Conversely, services that continue to operate administratively can be perceived as unfair when citizens feel ignored, uninformed, or experience differences in treatment between service users. This pattern confirms that citizen trust is shaped by fairness, respectful treatment, and the legitimacy of the service process.

Interviews indicate that institutionally, the SPKT recognizes the principle of fair service. Internal informants emphasized that services should not discriminate against citizens based on status, proximity, or background. However, at the practical level, perceptions of differential treatment persist. Some citizens stated that some service users appear to be served more quickly, while others wait longer without adequate explanation. For the public, this situation is not simply a technical issue, but rather an experience of injustice that undermines trust in the institution.

These findings demonstrate that fairness in SPKT services is experiential, not merely an administrative norm. Officers may feel they have followed procedures, but citizens judge fairness based on the transparency of reasoning, consistency of service delivery, and quality of communication. Therefore, fairness is not solely guaranteed by formal rules but must be evident in everyday interactions.

Procedural Clarity and Uncertainty: Unclear Flows Weaken Trust

The second finding indicates that unclear procedures are a major source of uncertainty in SPKT services. Basic facilities such as service rooms, administration desks, waiting chairs, and service equipment are available, but they do not fully assist citizens in understanding the service flow. Information about service types, process sequences, estimated timeframes, and complaint mechanisms is not clearly presented, leaving citizens dependent on explanations from officers or other service users.

This dependency significantly influences the quality of citizens' experiences with officers. When officers are communicative, citizens feel helped; but when officers are busy or do not explain things effectively, citizens experience confusion. From a public service logic perspective, service quality is shaped by citizens' experiences using the service, not solely by the existence of internal organizational procedures.

This finding is important because procedural clarity is an integral part of procedural justice. When residents don't understand the process, estimated timelines, and complaint channels, they find it difficult to trust that services are transparent. Therefore, the problem with SPKT is not only limited facilities, but also the weak function of information as a service orientation instrument.

Formal Compliance Versus Substantive Trust: SOPs Exist, But Don't Always Build Citizen Trust

The third finding indicates a gap between formal compliance with SOPs and the formation of substantive trust. Internal informants stated that every type of SPKT service has an SOP, including police reports, lost reports, and other administrative services. However, officers' understanding of the SOPs is not always uniform. Some officers still operate based on habit and field experience, so SOP implementation can vary between officers and service situations.

From the public's perspective, SOPs are not seen as easily understood guidelines. Residents are unaware of service standards, do not see clear procedural information, and receive varying explanations from officers. As a result, SOPs exist as an internal organizational instrument, but do not guarantee the service they perceive. This demonstrates the gap between formal compliance and substantive trust.

This gap is also evident in the complaint mechanism. Formally, complaint channels exist, but most residents don't know how to access them. When dissatisfied, residents tend to remain silent, go home, or file complaints informally. This situation results in complaints being poorly documented and follow-up actions not being publicly visible. Thus, service oversight remains largely internal and not transparent enough to build public trust.

Institutional Trust as a Relational Outcome: Trust Is Shaped by Accumulated Service Experience

The fourth finding indicates that trust in the Gorontalo Regional Police's SPKT is formed through the accumulation of citizen experience. Trust strengthens when service is perceived as clear, fair, communicative, and consistent. Conversely, trust weakens when citizens experience uncertain timing, limited information, varying officer responses, and an ineffective complaint mechanism.

Interview data indicates that assurance has not yet been fully felt by citizens. Internal stakeholders cited SOPs, officer professionalism, and service commitment as forms of assurance. However, citizens felt this assurance was not yet felt because waiting times remained uncertain, information was limited, and service depended on the officers on duty.

This means that trust is not shaped by the existence of SOPs, but by concrete experiences with certainty, openness, and consistency of service.

This finding aligns with recent police studies showing that institutional trust is a crucial mediator between procedural justice and police legitimacy. When citizens believe the police are fair and trustworthy, they are more likely to accept the institution's authority and cooperate. However, the relationship between procedural justice, legitimacy, and cooperation is not always simple because it is influenced by social context, institutional reputation, and previous experience.

Discussion

Reframing Police Service Quality through Procedural Justice

The findings of this study indicate that the quality of police service is not sufficiently explained by facilities, speed of response, or adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs). In the Gorontalo Regional Police Service Center (SPKT), citizens did pay attention to waiting rooms, queues, speed of service, and clarity of information, but their primary assessments stemmed from their experiences of being treated fairly, respected, and provided with reasonable explanations.

Theoretically, these findings support the procedural justice argument that citizens judge public institutions not only by their outcomes, but also by the process of interacting with authorities. Studies on police legitimacy confirm that procedural justice operates through fairness, respect, neutrality, and trustworthiness motives, which shape institutional trust and perceived legitimacy. Lee and Kwak, for example, showed that institutional trust and the obligation to obey mediate the relationship between procedural justice and police legitimacy.

However, these findings also feed into a more critical global debate. Kuen (2024), through a longitudinal study, found that police legitimacy had a stronger influence on police reporting behavior, while the direct and indirect effects of procedural justice on reporting behavior were insignificant. In the context of the Gorontalo Regional Police's SPKT (Serving Unit for the Prosecutor's Office), procedural justice remains important, but its effects are indirect; it operates through repeated experience, the legibility of procedures, and the belief that the institution is trustworthy.

Thus, this discussion reframes police service quality from service performance to justice-based service legitimacy. Fast service does not necessarily guarantee legitimacy, standard operating procedures do not necessarily guarantee trust, and formal facilities do not necessarily generate a sense of justice. Police service quality is substantively meaningful when citizens experience a clear, equitable, humane, and accountable process.

The Administrative Legitimacy Gap: When Formal Compliance Does Not Generate Substantive Trust

A key finding not fully explained by conventional service quality is the emergence of an administrative legitimacy gap, namely the gap between formal compliance with service standards and weak citizen trust. At the Gorontalo Regional Police Service Unit (SPKT), SOPs, complaint mechanisms, basic facilities, and service regulations are in place, but citizens still

experience uncertain flows, inconsistent information, unclear wait times, and difficult-to-access complaint channels.

This finding expands public service logic, which asserts that the value of public services is not created unilaterally by organizations but is shaped by the experiences of service users. Osborne positions public services as a value-creating process through the interaction of institutions, service users, and the social context of the service. From this perspective, SOPs are merely internal designs; public value is formed when these designs are readable, usable, and trusted by citizens.

The global debate on trust in public institutions also supports this reading. The OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2024 emphasized that public trust is influenced by citizens' experiences in daily interactions, particularly the competence, responsiveness, fairness, and values displayed by the institution. In the case of SPKT, the key issue is not simply whether services are available, but whether citizens perceive the institution to be competent, open, and fair.

The synthesis of these findings suggests that an administrative legitimacy gap arises when the service system is stronger as an internal document than as a public instrument. When SOPs are illegible, complaint mechanisms are unknown, and service time differences are not explained, formal compliance can actually breed distrust. In other words, formalization without public intelligibility may weaken legitimacy.

Procedural Clarity as a Missing Dimension in the Procedural Justice Debate

The concept of procedural justice generally emphasizes fairness, neutrality, voice, respect, and trustworthy motives. However, the findings of the Gorontalo Regional Police's Service Delivery Unit (SPKT) demonstrate the importance of procedural clarity in administrative services. Citizens require not only polite and fair treatment, but also clarity regarding the process, timeline, requirements, sequence, complaint channels, and the reasons why the process is moving faster or slower.

These findings expand procedural justice theory by positioning procedural clarity as a prerequisite for fairness. In police services, unclear processes are easily interpreted as unfairness, even though internally, differences in service times may be due to incomplete documents or the complexity of the case. Citizens don't always reject queues; what they reject is uncertainty without explanation. Studies on people-centered justice systems also emphasize that access to justice depends on citizens' ability to understand the process, access information, and receive predictable responses.

These findings connect with the literature on e-service quality and public trust. Jabri (2025) shows that information quality influences satisfaction, while offline service experiences still determine trust. This is relevant for the SPKT because the problem is not simply a lack of digitalization, but also a lack of sufficient information and legibility for citizens. Even when digital services are strengthened, trust will not be established if information remains unclear and citizens still rely on officers' interpretations.

Thus, the conceptual contribution of this research is to interpret procedural justice in frontline police services as fairness plus intelligibility. Fairness is insufficient if procedures are not understood; respect is insufficient if citizens are unaware of service status; and voice is insufficient if complaint channels are unknown. Therefore, procedural clarity can be positioned as a connecting dimension between service design and perceived justice.

Discretion on the Frontline and the Risks of Actor-Dependent Services

Other findings indicate the emergence of actor-dependent services, namely services that are highly dependent on the officer on duty, the current workload, and how officers interpret citizens' situations. Formally, SPKT has standard operating procedures (SOPs), but in practice, officer discretion still determines the service experience. Discretion can help maintain service continuity, but without clear standards, communication, and transparent oversight, service variations are easily perceived by citizens as unfair.

These findings broaden the frontline governance debate. Discretion by frontline officers is necessary because public services cannot always be carried out mechanically. However, discretion can also be a source of uncertainty if not guided by the principles of fairness and accountability. In public service logic, the value of service emerges in actual interactions, so frontline actors play a significant role in shaping citizens' experiences.

The literature on internal procedural justice also shows that officers' behavior toward citizens is influenced by experiences of justice within the organization. Yesberg (2024) found that fair and respectful treatment from superiors increases officers' self-legitimacy and self-efficacy. This means that fairness toward citizens is not merely a matter of individual ethics, but also the result of internal systems that shape officers' capacity, work pressure, and self-confidence.

In summary, actor-dependent service is not simply an officer issue, but a governance issue. When information systems are weak, SOPs are invisible, complaint channels are obscured, and workloads are high, discretion becomes overly dominant. This shifts service delivery from system-based governance to person-based access. Therefore, frontline discretion must be balanced with public-facing transparency.

Complaint Mechanisms as Trust Infrastructure, Not Just Administrative Channels

The findings of the Gorontalo Regional Police's Complaints and Grievances (SPKT) indicate that while formal complaints mechanisms exist, they do not yet function as trust infrastructure. Many citizens are unaware of the complaint channels, how to access them, or are unsure whether complaints will result in change. As a result, dissatisfaction remains a private experience, is not included in the evaluation system, and does not serve as a basis for institutional improvement.

This finding is important because complaint handling is not only an accountability instrument but also a signal of institutional responsiveness. The OECD emphasizes that trust in public institutions is influenced by whether citizens feel their voices are heard and that institutions are responsive to their needs and complaints. In this context, complaints become an arena for demonstrating whether institutions have trustworthy motives.

Global debates also indicate that rising public complaints often reflect a crisis of confidence in the state's capacity to respond to citizens. The Demos 2024 report in the UK showed a significant increase in complaints about public services since 2016 and linked this to the need for service reform to rebuild trust. While the UK context differs from Gorontalo, the global pattern is similar: when responses to complaints are invisible, public services lose legitimacy.

Thus, this research expands the concept of complaint mechanisms from administrative procedures to trust infrastructure. Invisible complaint mechanisms do not build trust; channels without feedback do not foster accountability; and undocumented complaints do not form the basis for organizational learning. Therefore, complaint handling needs to be positioned as a core component of procedural justice.

From Satisfaction to Legitimacy: A Contribution to the Global Governance Debate

Overall, this research demonstrates that the study of police services needs to move from satisfaction to legitimacy. Satisfaction can arise when a service is completed, but legitimacy is formed when citizens believe that the institution is acting fairly, transparently, and accountably. These findings go beyond SERVQUAL, which focuses on tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, as these indicators are insufficient to explain the formation of trust in coercive institutions like the police.

This research makes four contributions. First, it introduces the administrative legitimacy gap, a situation where formal procedures are in place but do not yet generate citizen trust. Second, it positions procedural clarity as a crucial dimension of procedural justice in administrative services. Third, it demonstrates that actor-dependent service undermines trust when officer discretion is not supported by system transparency. Fourth, it positions the complaint mechanism as a trust infrastructure, not simply a complaint channel.

These findings support the procedural justice literature on the importance of fairness and respect, while also extending it by demonstrating that fairness must be translated into a service system that is easily understood by citizens. These findings also address the criticism of longitudinal studies that procedural justice does not always directly lead to cooperation. In the case of the SPKT, procedural justice operates through a chain of experiences: procedural clarity, equal treatment, officer communication, complaint mechanisms, and the accumulation of trust.

Thus, this study's primary contribution to the global governance debate is that public trust is not produced by formal reform alone, but by the everyday experience of being treated fairly by the state. In police services, state legitimacy is built through moments when citizens feel heard, guided, and treated with dignity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that public trust in frontline police services cannot be adequately explained through conventional service quality approaches that focus on administrative performance and customer satisfaction. SERVQUAL remains useful for

assessing the operational dimensions of services, but is limited in explaining how institutional trust and public legitimacy are formed. The findings of the SPKT Gorontalo Regional Police demonstrate that improving the quality of formal services does not automatically generate citizen trust.

Using procedural justice as the primary lens, this study found that citizens evaluate police services not primarily through speed, convenience, or completion of procedures, but through fairness of treatment, clarity of processes, consistency of interactions, and credibility of institutional responses. Service quality becomes meaningful when citizens experience respect, equal treatment, easy-to-understand procedures, and confidence that their complaints are being addressed. This study identified four key findings: fairness beyond speed, procedural clarity, the administrative legitimacy gap, and the complaint mechanism as trust infrastructure. These four findings demonstrate that trust is not solely shaped by formal reforms, but through repeated experiences between citizens and the state at the frontline level.

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