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Testing Frustration-Aggression and Structural-FunctionalistExplanations of Kidnapping: A Sub-National Nigerian Case Study

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Abstract

A framework for explanation is most often provided by the frustration-aggression theory and the structural-functionalist theory of revolution but these have rarely been tested empirically within the same corpus of evidence. Using data collected through survey and correlation from three LGAs of Ondo State, Akure North, Akoko South-East and Akoko North-East it is seen that the frustration-aggression theory is the strongest predictor of the specific pattern of association between the incidence of kidnapping and human security. A survey (N = 280 of 302 questionnaires distributed: response rate = 93%) on perceptions of the effects of kidnapping in four discrete fields of institutional disruption and a composite index of general human security demonstrated a significantly and strongly positive association between kidnapping and each of the fields of health (r =.73), food (r =.62), economics (r =.58), and transportation (r =.56), all p <.01, but significantly weak positive association with the composite of all four fields (r =.23), p <.01. This discrepancy in behavior suggests that where insurgency has occurred, it leads to specific dysfunction between institutional subsystems rather than generalized dysfunction. Documentary and interview data gained elsewhere in the research programme, however, include clear traces of people's grievances with the government, the economy and the actions of the insurgent perpetrators. It is therefore that the two theories seem to operate as complementary rather than competing ones: the frustration-aggression theory explains the process of grievance; structural-functionalist theory explains the specific fields of institutional breakdown that generate rural insecurity.

Keywords: Frustration-Aggression Theory, Functionalism, Kidnapping, Nigeria, Ondo State, Insurgency, Human Security

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indeed, explanations of kidnapping in Nigeria seem to explicitly reference just two broad sociological and psychological theories: frustration-aggression theory and structural-functionalist theory (Okeke et al., 2023; Opakunbi et al., 2023). Yet, even in their most official uses, they seem to be used merely descriptively, after the fact to how a set of findings are interpreted, rather than as formally articulated test predictions operating on a shared data set. However, this is a significant caveat, because the theories make quite different predictions about how the cumulative damage of kidnapping should be expressed in data. Frustration-aggression theory, a classic psychological explanation of the emotional reaction to thwarted objectives (Dollard et al., 1939), would hypothesize that the effect of kidnapping should be expressed as a generalized state of distress or anger. Structural-functionalist theory, which characterizes society as a set of closely intertwined social institutions each supporting its own function (Lumen Learning, 2021), would hypothesize instead that the effect of kidnapping should be expressed as dysfunction in any specific subsystem of social life - economic, alimentary, medical, logistical - that directly impinged upon the victim. Utilizing primary survey and correlation data from three LGAs in Ondo State where kidnappings are common, this paper evaluates these two alternative explanations in the context of the broad field of human security. Instead of directly comparing or critiquing the theories, I ask only whether, in specific domains of human life, the effect of kidnapping more resembles a generalized psychological deficit or a set of institutional system failures.

1.1 Research Objective

This paper is a revisiting of a theoretical aspect of a large, mixed-methods inquiry into the impact of kidnapping on human security in Ondo State, that used frustration-aggression theory and structural-functionalist theory as the joint motivating theoretical construct. We narrow that construct to a comparative test of the correlational data coming from the original dissertation research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Frustration-Aggression Theory

Frustration-aggression theory was introduced at the Yale University's Institute of Human Relations by Dollard et al. (1939). It holds that when frustration-that is, the blocking of an individual or group from attaining a goal-is experienced, aggression is a typical response to frustration, and the magnitude of the aggression is proportionate to that of the frustration. When applied to Nigerian kidnapping, the theory suggests that the practice is driven by young people's relative deprivation vis-à-vis the state and its material and educational infrastructure, which is expressed in feelings of anger and criminal conduct (Okeke et al., 2023). For example, paying the ransom to abducted expatriates has been characterized as a form of protest against unemployment and the subsequent infrastructural neglect or of the adverse environmental effects of oil extraction. Such interpretations, however, have been challenged for assuming that frustration is a uniform psychological state inducing aggression, when frustration can manifest in feelings of anxiety, depression, or retreat as much as aggression (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Skeptics have also observed that as a theory originating in western criminology, it is not easily translatable to the context-specific realities of Nigerian insecurity.

2.2 Structural-Functionalist Theory

The theories of structural functionalism originated with Herbert Spencer's analogy of society to an organism, which was further developed by Durkheim, Merton, and Parsons into a view of society as a complex system of interdependent institutions performing functions conducive to the order and stability of society (Lumen Learning, 2021). When applied to the instance of kidnapping, the failure of various

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institutions and subsystems to perform the functions necessary to the success of the system gives rise to anomie. The functions of various economic and political subsystems are not being performed properly, and the strain caused by this malfunction would manifest itself as poverty, unemployment, and marginalization of various sections of the population, with kidnapping merely an instance of the deviant adaption of a social system which is not providing its members with legitimate opportunities to attain its goals (Gongs et al., 2021). Among the many critiques of structural functionalism have been arguments over its assumptions about how system equilibrium is maintained, how it can account for large outside shocks, its relative un-falsifiability and broad scope, and its lack of emphasis on social inequality as a cause rather than merely a consequence of systematic malfunction (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024; Gongs et al., 2021).

2.3 Competing Empirical Predictions

Both accounts assume that there will be social consequences of a crime such as kidnapping, but differ on exactly how these should be manifested in the survey data. The frustration-aggression account of insecurity, in which insecurity is conceptualized as a psychological state due to the experience of any goal being blocked, predicts that the effect of kidnapping on insecurity should be dispersed and diffuse across measures, with only a slight variation dependent on the institutional domain in question. A structural-functionalist account of insecurity, in contrast, would predict that the effect on insecurity should be much more targeted; the effect should be felt primarily where the institutionally situated form of the immobilization wrought by the mechanics of kidnapping has the greatest impact on an institutional subsystem (transport, trade, hospitals, food production) and much less on the measure of general social trust and cohesion. Table 1 presents these alternate expectations; Part 4 evaluates the patterns revealed by the data.

Table 1. Summary of Competing Theoretical Predictions

Theoretical Framework	Level of Analysis	Predicted Empirical Pattern
Frustration-aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939)	Individual / psychological	Diffuse, uniformly elevated distress: correlations of similar magnitude across all domain-specific and composite measures
Structural-functionalist theory (Merton, 1938; Lumen Learning, 2021)	Institutional / societal	Differentiated dysfunction: strong domain-specific correlations, markedly weaker correlation with a generalized composite

Note. Compiled by the author from the theoretical literature reviewed in Section 2.

2.4 Recent Empirical Context (2024–2026)

This empirical picture rests within a wider and still developing literature on Nigerian kidnapping. An incident-level investigation of abductions in Nigeria's federal capital territory indicates a rise from 21 reported incidents in 2021 to a peak of 50 in 2023, by the end of which period, incident numbers had only partially fallen back, from 50 to 31 in early 2025, but at a time when total abductions – and deaths – had continued to edge up, from 668 to 718, and from 31 to 34 respectively (Yahaya & Garba, 2026). Categorising the problem in terms of governance, Anagba and Sokoajin (2025) describe Nigeria as afflicted by a set of structural vulnerabilities that create ideal conditions for kidnapping operations to

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flourish, while policy responses have failed to adequately respond to the scale and sophistication of perpetrator networks. Along similar lines, extant mixed-methods evidence from Ethiopia's Central Gondar zone (Mola, 2025) makes a parallel set of observations about the multiple dimensions of harm (across institutions and the community) caused by kidnapping. These findings provide powerful motivation to not take for granted, but directly assess whether the data support either of the competing theories of institutional rapture.

3. METHODS

3.1 Design

This report presents the findings of a research which used a mixed methods design of a household survey in conjunction with KIIs and FGDs. The theoretical comparison outlined below focuses mainly on the results of the correlation analysis of the survey read in conjunction with the larger research programme's qualitative interpretation for each theory.

3.2 Study Area, Sample, and Instrumentation

The study was carried out in three of the 18 LGAs in the study area of Ondo State namely Akure North, Akoko South-East and Akoko North-East. The sample size for the study was determined based on the Taro Yamane (1967) formula at 95 per cent confidence level, 5% margin of error, which resulted in a target sample size of 400 respondents proportionately stratified according to the three LGAs. Due to security concerns that constrained the exercise in the study area, 302 questionnaires were administered, with 280 returned and usable. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information on the respondents' perceptions of the impact of kidnapping on four security domains (food security, health security, transportation security and economic security) and one composite general human security index (the respondent's perception of how kidnapping worsens the security situation in the state, exposes the community to danger, and worsens poverty and inequality). The questionnaire was administered through stratified random sampling using age, gender, occupation and residence type. Multi-item Likert scales were used to capture the perceptions of the respondents of the four security domains on the impact of kidnapping and a three-item composite index was constructed for the general human security index. The respondent's perceptions were captured by the following three items: extent to which kidnapping worsens the state's security situation, extent to which kidnapping exposes the community to danger and extent to which kidnapping worsens poverty and inequality. Pearson correlation coefficients (r) between the incidence of kidnapping and the different security indices were calculated using Stata 15.

3.3 Analytic Approach

This paper does not test one theory at a time, but instead tests the pattern of correlation coefficients of the five security measures for the two hypotheses presented in the previous section (Section 2.3). The frustration-aggression prediction of diffuse psychological elevation would be supported if all five measures show a pattern of correlations that are similarly high and similar in size. Alternatively, the structural-functionalist prediction of institution-specific dysfunction would be supported if five strong domain-specific correlations are observed with the overall or composite correlation being significantly weaker than the domain-specific correlations.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Domain-Specific and Composite Correlations

The correlation coefficients between two variables - kidnapping counts and the five security measures - are shown in Table 2 and Figure 1. All five were significant and positive (all $p < .01$ (two-tailed)) and the

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strength of the correlations varied widely; health security was the most strongly correlated with kidnapping, r(278) =.73; food security was next r(278) =.62; economic security, r(278) =.58; transportation security, r(278) =.56. The general human security index was less than a third the magnitude of the correlation between health security and kidnapping, r(278) =.23.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations Between Kidnapping Incidence and Security Measures

Security Measure	r	N	p
Health security	**.73**	280	< .01
Food security	**.62**	280	< .01
Economic security	**.58**	280	< .01
Transportation security	**.56**	280	< .01
General human security (composite)	**.23**	280	< .01

Note. General human security was measured as a composite of three items: overall sense of safety, community cohesion and trust, and poverty and inequality.

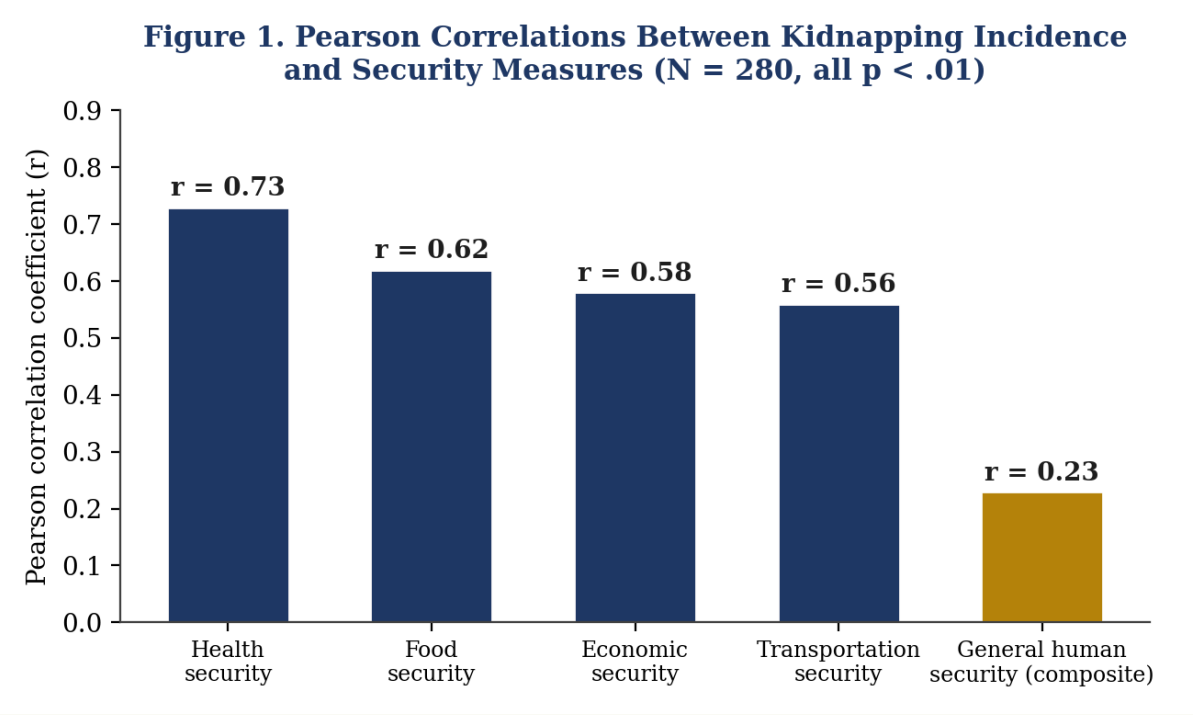


Figure 1. Pearson correlations between kidnapping incidence and security measures. Source: author's dissertation survey data (N = 280).

4.2 Composition of the General Human Security Measure

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the item means for the composite general security scale. The most strongly endorsed item was kidnapping undermines the overall sense of security and safety in Ondo State (mean 4.73/5), followed by kidnaping damages community cohesion and trust between residents (mean 4.35), and kidnaping worsens poverty and inequality (mean 4.33).

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Table 3. Item-Level Ratings Underlying the General Human Security Composite

Item	M	Rank
Undermines overall sense of safety and security	**4.73**	1
Causes decline in community cohesion and trust	**4.35**	2
Worsens poverty and inequality	**4.33**	3

Note. N = 280. Items rated on a 1-5 scale.

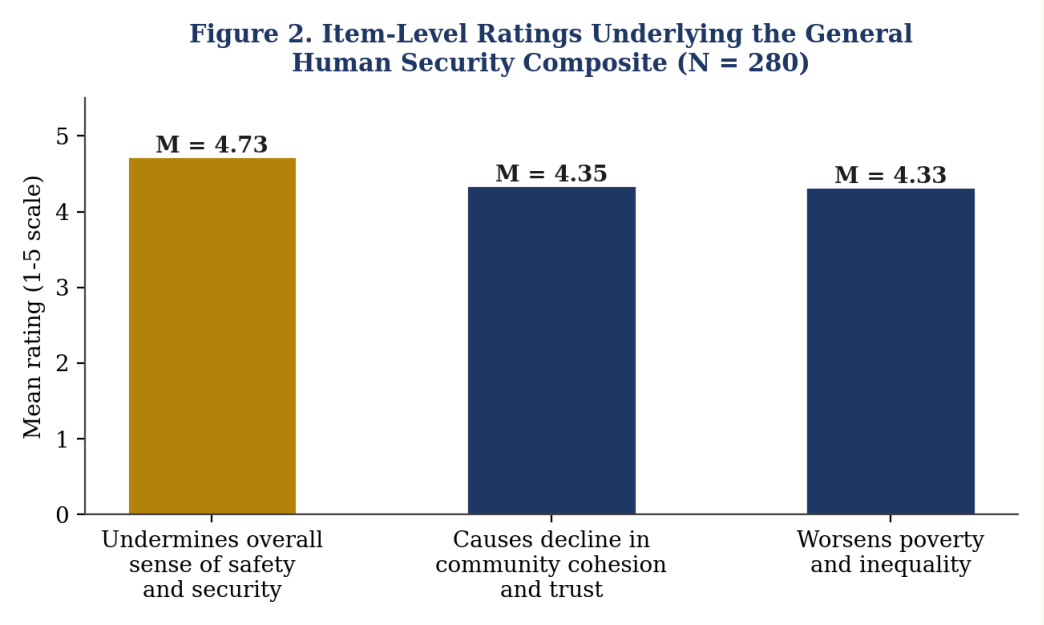


Figure 2. Item-level ratings underlying the general human security composite. Source: author's dissertation survey data (N = 280).

Significantly, all three components of the composite measures were rated on average well above 4.3 on a scale of 5, suggesting that the respondents did perceive kidnapping as a risk on all three individual axes separately measured. Thus, the lack of a significant relationship between overall levels of kidnapping and the composite measure (Section 4.1) cannot be explained by respondents ignoring the three axes of the composite measure; it can only be explained by the fact that the observed pattern of variation in kidnapping across respondent's localities is much better explained by the four separate security measures (health, food, economic and transportation security) than it is by the holistic composite.

4.3 Interpretation Offered Within the Original Study

In the broader study, the finding of a positive relationship between rate of kidnapping and economic security, r(278) =.58, was seen to offer evidence of frustration-aggression: an overly hostile socio-economic setting in which people have few hopes, their lives full of disappointments, will inevitably lead to hostility and destabilizing social conduct. This was taken to suggest a breaking up of the economic and social order, compounded by the loss of common legitimate interests.

5. DISCUSSION

This study main empirical finding - that links between security and kidnapping rates are very strong and

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varies across four different security regimes and where security-holistic composite linkages are statistically significantly weaker - provides however limited, real grounds for choosing between the two explanations we have offered. At face-value, this pattern is more easily reconcileable with the central argument of structural functionalism than with a literal perspective on frustration-aggression theory. If the negative effects of kidnapping are primarily "mediated by a general condition of frustrated or angry arousal" (Dollard et al., 1939), then I would expect that condition to be roughly equivalently expressed in domain-specific questions, as well as with a single composite question assembled from those same three questions. However, the composite item's correlation with kidnapping was less than a third of the correlation of the total health security score, despite the fact that each of the composite item's three questions was strongly positively evaluated in their own right (Table 3). This is more easily explained as resulting from multiple, unique dysfunctions emerging in specific institutions- A clinic no longer functioning, transportation costs rising sharply, a farm being neglected- only loosely experienced as a common feeling of insecurity the way a generalized state of anger or frustration might be, the differentiated-subsystem pattern that structural-functionalist theory predicts (Gongs et al., 2021; Lumen Learning, 2021). But it would also be premature to claim that a structural functionalist account trumps the frustration-aggression explanation altogether, since there are two reasons to remain cautious. First, it is important to remember that qualitative and sufficiently item-specific quantitative results from the longer research program strikingly demonstrate intense frustration about the governor's passiveness, impunity for kidnappers, and dampened business potential in even the expanded sample.

There is no reason to deny that these sets of findings are consistent-in fact, quite consistent –; rather, it seems plausible that the frustration-aggression explanation can (still) account for individual feeling and interaction more convincingly than the cluster of victim-site harms that may be associated with it. Second, one should note that the data analyzed here were about residents' perceptions, not about kidnapped victims' perceptions; the former were community survey data, the latter the most sensitive discussion a person can have with an interviewer, and that is a very important difference to recognize. Overall, the result points to the two theories functioning as alternate yet non-competing levels of analysis in the Nigerian kidnapping literature: the former "theory of why", the most persuasive explanation for why the socioeconomically disadvantaged seek protection and attack the state initially, and the latter "theory of how", the best-supported theory for how the harms caused by the kidnapping spreads across the subsystems of health, transport, food, and commerce that sustain the rural community. Either way, theory-building on kidnapping in Ondo State (and very likely other similar Nigerian sub-national systems) benefits from regard for the two perspectives as necessities, not competitors.

5.1 Implications for Theory and Future Research

- **Multi-theory rather than single-theory studies.** Replicating the comparative approach here, future study using the frustration-aggression or structural-functionalist paradigm to examine terrorism, kidnapping or insurgent violence in Nigeria should specify before the data is collected the set of evidence each theory expects.
- **Disaggregated measures of security**. Future research should gather security measures across each domain separately-food, employment, personal safety, social integration-rather than relying on a global security index, which in this case obscured perhaps the most critical finding: differing levels of association between kidnapping and specific compared to general dimensions of perceived security.
- **Perpetrator-level data.** Since the ultimate focus of frustration-aggression theory is on person motivation, a more direct test would have to come from the perspective of offenders (either interviews, case files or records of the reintegration programmes for ex-combatants or

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ex-perpetrators). Although difficult, this represents the next logical step in testing the theory on its own terms.

- **Additional theoretical perspectives.** Since neither theory solely explains the variance, so more work might use models that focus specifically on institutional domain or on cumulative stress, such as routine activity theory or general strain theory (Agnew, 1992).

5.2 Limitations

This comparison is based on just three LGAs within one Nigerian state, using comparable three-domain composite and domain-specific measures, and in drawing conclusions about relative fit, the results here should be viewed as suggestive rather than conclusive. Other types of correlational cross-sectional data, including the instrumental variable approach of the proposed path analysis, cannot discount the reverse or reciprocal direction of causality, including the possibility that higher levels of insecurity per se might increase the likelihood of recurrent kidnap attempts. Correlational data of this type are also unable to clarify whether the three-domain composite measures alone are more reliable or measure respondents' conceptual domain more accurately than the domain-specific measures. The community-perception data are also more appropriate for testing the downstream populational consequences of frustration-aggression theory than for hypothesized etiology and perpetrator motivation, which would demand different data altogether. Moreover, this comparison is limited by being based on a handful of five correlation coefficients; the analysis might be strengthened by a disaggregated path analysis or structural equation model, as would be possible using the dissertation's full data set.

6. CONCLUSION

Both frustration-aggression and structural-functionalist accounts have been invoked in explanations of kidnapping in Nigeria, but have not been explicitly tested with the same evidence base. This paper finds - based on correlational data from Ondo State - a ratio of strong, differentiated, domain-specific correlations between insecurity and kidnapping, to a weaker correlations between these same indicators and a diffuse composite measure, more similar to the pattern predicted by structural-functionalist view of institutional breakdown than to the pattern predicted by a frustration-aggression approach that assumes uniform psychological elevation of all individuals in the population. Qualitative evidence of frustration and grievance in the same population suggests a more integrative conclusion: when explaining the same phenomenon, both models may best be understood as working at different levels of analysis, simultaneously.

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