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Capital Punishment: The Roles of Human Freedom, Economic Wealth, and National Culture

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The purpose of this study is to explore the relationships of capital punishment, national culture, human freedom, and economic wealth. In this research study, a sample of 70 countries was used that possessed data available for all the variables used in the study. The research questions were tested with hierarchical regression with SPSS, variance inflationary factor (VIF) analysis was used to measure multi-collinearity, and to measure mediation, a hierarchical Bayesian test was conducted using the posterior p-value and indirect effect. The results suggest important direct and indirect roles of different cultural dimensions on human freedom and capital punishment. Capital punishment was directly impacted by culture (uncertainty avoidance, indulgence). Human freedom was indirectly impacted and, thus, mediated the impact of culture (long-term orientation, power distance) and economic wealth on capital punishment. These results could have important implications for abolitionists, retentionists, international investors, and future researchers.

KEYWORDS *Capital Punishment, National Culture, Human Freedom, Economic Wealth*

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I. Introduction

Capital punishment is a highly contentious topic all over the world. Despite the fact that organizations such as Amnesty International strongly oppose capital punishment, very little progress has been made to abolish it. Many nations around the world have already abolished capital punishment, and the idea of abolishing it globally has been tabled at the United Nations (UN). The opposition to capital punishment continues to grow globally, and Rajat Khosla, the senior director of research, policy, and advocacy for the UN has stated, “state sponsored executions have no place in the modern world.” According to Amnesty International (2020), “Some countries are bucking the trend. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, and Yemen significantly increased executions in 2019 compared to 2018; Bahrain and Bangladesh resumed executions after a one-year hiatus.” In the United States, the federal government had not used the death penalty for over 17 years, but President Donald Trump’s Justice Department resumed federal executions when he entered office. After carrying out an execution shortly before leaving office, President Donald Trump’s Justice Department has now executed more prisoners than any other president in the last 120 years (Tarn and Kunzelman 2021).

In a research study published by David Garland (2005) called *Capital Punishment and American Culture*, he argues that capital punishment in the United States has become a human rights scandal that globally produces anti-American sentiment. That “anti-American sentiment” could be shared with the other countries that still enforce capital punishment. However, he dismisses the theory that the United States’ culture has anything to do with their enforcement of capital punishment. Garland “want(s) to reject this culturalist version of American exceptionalism, resist the notion that there is something deep, and abiding about American culture that propels its judicial system towards capital punishment” (Garland 2005, 347). Nevertheless, no one has explored the potential relationships between national cultural dimensions and capital punishment. He does not mention Hofstede’s cultural dimensions or compare them among countries to evaluate their impact. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted that thoroughly evaluates the relationship between culture and capital punishment.

In a research study called, *Poverty and the Death Penalty*, the researchers sought to discover if a victim’s economic status influenced their likelihood of being sentenced to death. After conducting their research, they were “convinced that murder victims who are poor, regardless of their race, are afforded an unequal, second-class status” (Johnson and Johnson 2001, 521). This study indicates that there is a potential relationship between economic status and the probability of being sentenced to death. Every year, thousands of people are executed by their respective governments. In 2019, the United States carried out twenty-one executions (Amnesty International 2019). Although, it is not limited to just the United States; many other countries carried out executions in 2019. It would be worth investigating if that potential relationship explored by Jeffrey and Colleen Johnson is apparent on the global scale. Regardless, there is limited to no research that explores the direct relationship between a country’s economic wealth and their likelihood to execute prisoners.

In a study conducted by David F. Greenberg and Valerie West (2008), the researchers evaluated variables that may contribute to a country’s use of capital punishment. One of the variables included in the study is political rights. The political rights score is found using the Freedom House scale which scores a country on both civil and political rights to assign the country a total score. This scoring system means that this political rights variable is very similar to a human freedom variable since human freedom is made up of civil, political, and economic rights. The

researchers found that “countries with fewer political rights are more likely to have the death penalty” (Greenberg and West 2008, 248). In another study, the researchers evaluate the possible relationships human freedom might share with national culture. A study by Robert L. Engle and Johanna E. Morse (2019) evaluates the relationship between human freedom and Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. The researchers used the same Human Freedom Index, but from 2018. They described the citizens of a country with a high level of human freedom as being able to “learn how to harmoniously live among others, practice freely desired lifestyles, and accept differences” (Engle and Morse 2019, 4). After testing the relationship, the researchers found that specific cultural dimensions (power distance index (PDI), long-term orientation (LTO), and indulgence versus restraint (IVR)) had significant relationships with human freedom.

Given the limited research that explores the relationships between capital punishment, human freedom, national culture, and economic wealth, the purpose of this multinational study is to explore these potential relationships in order to observe whether these antecedents have a significant relationship with a country’s likelihood to practice capital punishment or not.

II. Background

Capital Punishment

In this study, capital punishment was split into two categories. Using the data made available by the United Nations in 2020, countries were classified as either a country that has capital punishment or a country that does not have capital punishment. As previously mentioned, capital punishment is a very contentious topic globally. Some countries abolished capital punishment decades ago or never had it, while other societies reintegrated it into their law. In today’s society, social movements and organizations have pushed hard to have capital punishment outlawed globally. The European Union abolished the death penalty because they deemed it incredibly inhumane (Hood 2001). Claire Finkelstein (2006) makes a different argument against capital punishment in her article entitled “A Contractarian Argument against the Death Penalty.” Finkelstein (2006) explains that the argument for capital punishment is flawed. She believes that it is flawed because each person who accepts the law to be in place would have to imagine themselves a victim of that law. This projection is nearly impossible, and each “agent,” as she refers to them in the study, would have to imagine themselves being a victim of capital punishment. In that projection, the individual would not benefit from the law. She suggests that the reason individuals support the law is for the benefit they receive from its possible deterrent effect. Therefore, if they could accurately put themselves in the person’s situation subject to that law, they would most likely not support it.

Those who support the death penalty in countries worldwide would most likely agree that capital punishment helps deter crime. In a study entitled “Does Capital Punishment Have a Deterrent Effect? New Evidence from Postmoratorium Panel Data,” the researchers explored the idea that capital punishment has a deterrent effect. A deterrent effect is when capital punishment discourages the general public from committing any heinous crimes because they do not want to be sentenced to death. The researchers found “that the legal change allowing executions beginning in 1977 has been associated with significant reductions in homicide” (Dezhbakhsh, Rubin, and Shepherd 2003, 373). In another study conducted by Dezhbakhsh and Shepherd (2006) called “The Deterrent Effect of Capital Punishment: Evidence from a Judicial Experiment,” they attempt to

discover if the deterrent effect is present for all crimes, not just murder. The researchers found that “the death penalty does not cause a decrease in property crimes, suggesting that the deterrent effect is not reflecting general trends in crime” (Dezhbakhsh and Shepherd 2006, 532). This suggests that while some countries view capital punishment as an inhumane form of punishment, real research indicates it provides some deterrent effect.

National culture

Professor Geert Hofstede conducted comprehensive multinational research studies on culture. Hofstede (2001) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others.” Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) differentiated national culture into six dimensions: power distance, masculinity, individualism, long-term orientation, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence. All six dimensions will be included in this study to evaluate if they significantly impact whether a country has capital punishment or does not have capital punishment.

In a study conducted by Austin Sarat and Christian Boulanger (2005), they evaluate different cultures and examine if culture plays a role in enforcing the death penalty. The researchers did not use Hofstede’s cultural dimensions for their definition of culture. Therefore, the researchers did not collect any data or conduct any mathematical analysis to evaluate culture’s significance. Instead, Sarat and Boulanger (2005) looked at previous research on culture and capital punishment. The research they reviewed evaluates the role of culture in capital punishment for a specific country like the United States. Based on previous research, the researchers argue that culture is influential in a country’s likelihood to either have the death penalty or not. They believe that if abolitionists want to succeed, they first need to know the country they are attempting to have capital punishment abolished in. The relationship between culture and punishment was pondered in a previous study conducted by David Garland. Garland believes that culture and punishment might be connected because punishment “helps shape the overarching culture and contributes to the generation and regeneration of its terms” (Garland 1990, 248). These studies suggest that the relationship between capital punishment and culture needs to be evaluated through a mathematical approach that assesses these findings’ validity.

In a book entitled, *Cultural Consequences 2nd Edition*, Professor Geert Hofstede (2001) argues that culture plays a significant role in social norms. These social norms shape institutions such as government policies and legislation. This, in turn, reinforces and impacts social norms. This circular relationship regarding the government’s position of capital punishment is being examined in this study. In particular, the role of each of Hofstede’s six dimensions are explored as research is silent regarding the role of culture and social norms, specifically regarding capital punishment.

Economic wealth

In this study, GDP per capita was used as the determinant of a country’s level of economic wealth. In a study conducted by David F. Greenberg and Valerie West (2008), the researchers reviewed variables that could have an impact on a country having capital punishment or not. They evaluated the relationship of political rights with capital punishment. They also assessed the impact of economic development on a country having or not having capital punishment. The researchers did not use GDP for their study. However, they argued that a country with a high level of economic development will have “greater use of instrumental rationality and the weakening of religious

beliefs... fostering acceptance of cultural relativism” (Greenberg and West 2008, 311). They ultimately found that “the more developed economies are more likely to have political rights and as a result, are less likely to have capital punishment” (Greenberg and West 2008, 331). This study indicates that there is a relationship between economic development and a country’s probability of having capital punishment. The researchers used economic development and did not use GDP. This determined that the relationship between GDP and capital punishment requires further research before it is understood.

In another study by Carsten Anckar (2014) called “Why Countries Choose the Death Penalty,” the researcher investigates the potential homogeneity between countries that either have or do not have the death penalty. One of the variables used by the researcher is size and socioeconomic development which was determined by comprising GDP per capita and infant mortality rate. The researchers ultimately found that “with regard to GDP per capita... abolitionist countries are much wealthier than countries where death penalty statutes are still in use in some form... retentionist countries are relatively wealthier today than they were in the year 2000” (Anckar 2014, 16). This research indicates that there is potentially a link between GDPs per capita and capital punishment. More research needs to be conducted since the research conducted by Anckar does not use GDP per capita as its own variable. Therefore, its effect is not fully understood.

Human freedom

In this study, human freedom is defined by the creators of Cato’s “Human Freedom Index.” Ian Vásquez and Tanja Porčnik (2019, 7) defined human freedom as “the absence of coercive constraint.” The researchers came up with a numeric value for human freedom by measuring a country on 12 sub-categories scored 1-10 with 1 being the lowest score of that category and 10 being the highest. The final score would be the average of all sub-category scores (Vásquez and Porčnik 2019).

Amnesty International (2007) has described the death penalty as “the ultimate denial of human rights. It is the pre-meditated and cold-blooded killing of a human being by the state. This cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishment is done in the name of justice. It violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Based on this statement, Amnesty International would most likely agree that levels of human freedom would be lower in countries with the death penalty because the death penalty is an “inhuman and degrading punishment.” In a research study by Mathew D. Mathias (2013), the researcher investigates the influence of human rights on the death penalty. He conducts his research across multiple countries in order to evaluate if there is a relationship between their level of human rights and capital punishment. Mathias (2013, 1267) revealed “that not only does the human rights regime exert an influence on states’ legislative position on the death penalty, but it also deters states’ practice of the death penalty as well.” This research indicates that there is a potential relationship between human rights and capital punishment. Given that human rights and human freedom are very similar, one could hypothesize that human freedom will have a similar relationship. However, little to no research has been done to explore that relationship.

III. Research questions

Given that there is limited research that explores Hofstede's cultural dimensions, economic wealth, and human freedom in relation to capital punishment, these six research questions were developed:

- RQ1:** To what degree do the six dimensions of national culture impact a country's use of capital punishment?
- RQ2:** To what degree do the significant dimensions of national culture and human freedom impact a country's use of capital punishment?
- RQ3:** To what degree do the significant dimensions of national culture together with human freedom and economic wealth impact a country's use of capital punishment?
- RQ4:** To what degree do the six dimensions of national culture impact human freedom?
- RQ5:** To what degree do the significant dimensions of national culture and economic wealth impact human freedom?
- RQ6:** Does human freedom mediate the effect of economic wealth and/or the significant relationships between national culture and capital punishment?

IV. Methodology

Amnesty International data was used for the dependent variable, capital punishment (accessed September 2020). In order to remain unbiased and independent, Amnesty International conducts this research without financial aid from any country or government. Amnesty International collects their data on this topic from the capital punishment statistics that the UN makes public. Hofstede's six cultural dimensions were used including uncertainty avoidance, power distance, indulgence, long-term orientation, individualism, and masculinity. This data was collected from *Hofstede Insights* (Hofstede 2020). The data was analyzed on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher the score, the higher the likelihood that the country practiced one of the six dimensions in their culture. Human freedom was collected using Cato's "Human Freedom Index" (Vásquez and Porčnik 2019). Countries are measured on 12 sub-categories and are compared on a scale of 0 to 10. The higher the score, the higher the human freedom in that country. A country's wealth was measured by GDP/cap/ppp, and that data was collected from the CIA's "World Factbook" (accessed September 2020). GDP per capita was the form of GDP that was used to compare countries.

In this research study, a sample of 70 countries was used that possessed data available for all the variables used in the study. The research questions were tested with hierarchical regression with SPSS. Variance inflationary factor (VIF) analysis was used to measure multi-collinearity. To measure mediation, a hierarchical Bayesian test was conducted using the posterior P-value and indirect effect (Falk, Savalei, and Biesanz 2016).

V. Results

Tables 1 shows the basic descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables that were evaluated in the study. Table 2 illustrates the correlations among the variables in the study. Table 3 addresses most of the research questions in the study. In Table 3, Model 2a focuses on **RQ1**, the results indicate that IND, LTO, UAI, and IVR were significant (positive) predictors and

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Capital punishment (CAP)	.24	.43	70
Individuality (IND)	43.37	23.26	70
Masculinity (MAS)	48.51	19.11	70
Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)	66.66	22.41	70
Indulgence (IVR)	48.96	22.56	70
Long-term orientation (LTO)	42.64	21.97	70
Power distance (PDI)	60.83	21.75	70
Human Freedom Index (HFI)	7.31	1.12	70
GDP per capita (GDP) (in 1000s)	28.92	19.84	70

Table 2. Correlations.

	CAP	IND	MAS	UAI	IVR	LTO	PDI	HFI	GDP
CAP	1								
IND	-.296	1							
MAS	.101	.138	1						
UAI	-.285	-.203	.039	1					
IVR	-.290	.165	-.066	-.143	1				
LTO	-.075	.266	.211	-.011	-.424	1			
PDI	.267	-.663	.132	.154	-.256	-.018	1		
HFI	-.435	.623	-.078	-.018	.087	.000	-.557	1	
GDP	-.157	.650	-.008	-.219	.214	.357	-.546	.649	1

Notes: **Bold** $p < .05$; for abbreviations, see Table 1.

MAS was a significant (negative) predictor of the variance in capital punishment (R^2 .340). **RQ2** was addressed through Model 2b. The results indicate that human freedom, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence versus restraint were significant (negative) predictors of the variance in capital punishment (R^2 .382). **RQ3** was addressed by Model 2c. The results reveal that human freedom, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence versus restraint were significant (negative) predictors of the variance in capital punishment (R^2 .385). Models 1a and 1b evaluate **RQ4**; the results suggest that lower power distance, higher individuality, and higher long-term orientation were significant predictors of the variance in human freedom. **RQ5** is evaluated by Models 1c and 1d, which found that lower power distance, higher long-term orientation, and higher economic wealth were significant predictors of the variance in human freedom.

Table 3. Regression models.

	Model 1a Std. Beta	Model 1b Std. Beta	Model 1c Std. Beta	Model 1d Std. Beta	Model 2a Std. Beta	Model 2b Std. Beta	Model 2c Std. Beta
PDI	-.261¹	-.293¹	-.229*	-.362³	.028	-	-
IND	.354²	.357²	.243*	-	-.253*	-.111	-
MAS	-.198 ¹	-.164*	-.140	-	.188*	.117	-
LTO	.441³	.355³	.288²	.290²	-.221*	-.089	-
UAI	.116	-	-	-	-.400³	-.363³	-.298²
IVR	.162*	-	-	-	-.393²	-.339²	-.329²
HFI	Dep.	Dep.	Dep.	Dep.	-	-.303¹	-.542³
GDP	-	-	.262¹	.348²	-	-	.200
CAP	-	-	-	-	Dep.	Dep.	Dep.
<i>R</i> ²	.569	.547	.581	.549	.340	.382	.385
<i>Adj. R</i> ²	.529	.519	.548	.529	.279	.325	.347
ΔR^2	-	-.022	.034	-.032	-	.042	.003
<i>F value</i>	14.278³	19.635³	17.764³	26.832³	5.569³	6.693³	10.162³

Notes: * $p < .10$; ¹ $p < .05$; ² $p < .01$; ³ $p < .001$; for abbreviations, see Table 1.

The variance inflationary factor (VIF) was utilized for each of the regression models to measure the degree of multicollinearity between the independent variables. If the degree of multicollinearity is high between the variables, it will be difficult to differentiate the regression results. The VIF scores of all seven of the models were between 1 and 2, which were less than the suggested score of 5. This indicates that there should be no problems with the interpretation of the variables due to multicollinearity (Hair et al. 2006).

In order to find **RQ6**, possible indirect effects have to be addressed through the hierarchical Bayesian test and the partial posterior p-value analysis. The hierarchical Bayesian test was used as opposed to the Monte Carlo method, because hierarchical Bayesian was found to be more precise for samples of less than 100, and this study includes 70 samples. The partial posterior p-value analysis is used to measure the indirect effect p-value, and the hierarchical Bayesian test is used to find the confidence interval. Falk, Savalei, and Biesanz (2016) developed calculators that can find the degree of mediation by conducting the partial posterior probability and the hierarchical Bayesian test. Falk, Savalei, Biesanz believe that these calculators can be used to make inferences about indirect effects in multiple regression models because they are able to find the partial posterior p-value and the confidence interval of the relationships. The confidence interval and partial posterior p-value indicate whether mediation is occurring or not. When the confidence level does not cross over zero and the partial posterior p-value is less than .05, then the mediation is significant (Falk, Savalei, and Biesanz 2016).

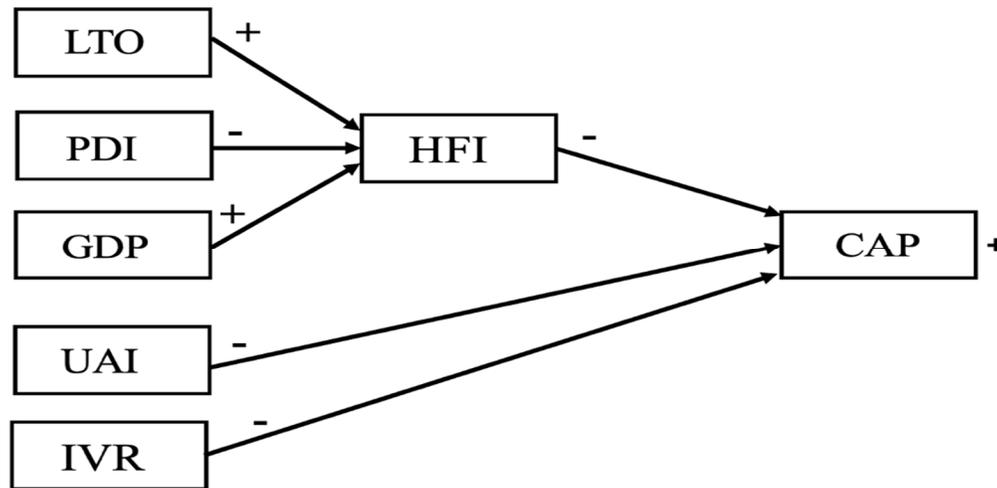
Table 4 results indicates that long-term orientation (LTO), power distance (PDI), and economic wealth (GDP) impact capital punishment though the human freedom (HFI) mediation variable at a significant level. In all of the confidence intervals, zero is not included and the posterior p-values are less than .05. Thus, all of the mediations are significant.

Table 4. Hierarchical Bayesian test of indirect effect and partial posterior p-value analysis (significant only indicated).

Settings & Results	LTO>HFI*>CAP	PDI>HFI*>CAP	GDP>HFI*>CAP
Computational accuracy setting	Excellent	excellent	excellent
Confidence interval setting (%)	.95	.95	.95
Confidence interval	.0003, .0050	-.0059, -.0005	-.0088, -.0016
Partial posterior p-value	.0016	.0006	.0009

Note: * mediator variable; for abbreviations, see Table 1.

Figure 1. Capital punishment model significant results.



VI. Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the three antecedents (culture, human freedom, and economic wealth) used in this model play significant roles with regards to capital punishment in sample countries. As seen in Figure 1, two cultural dimensions, uncertainty avoidance and indulgence, have direct impacts on capital punishment. The cultural dimensions of long-term orientation, power distance, and economic wealth have significant impacts on human freedom. This, in turn, impacts capital punishment. Human freedom acts as a mediator between culture, economic wealth, and capital punishment.

Opposition to capital punishment has grown recently; some countries have reinstated or increased capital punishment. Many countries and individuals view the death penalty as an inhumane form of punishment (Hood 2001) while others still support it. This indicates that the current strategies to abolish capital punishment have not been entirely successful. Thus, these results could have very important implications for abolitionists. As indicated in Figure 1, human freedom and culture are both significant factors in explaining whether a country will have capital punishment or not. Abolitionists should consider these factors when they are trying to abolish capital punishment. They should specifically focus on raising the levels of human freedom, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence within society. After raising these levels, abolitionists may

have more success in having the law abolished. On the other hand, these findings have implications for retentionists who hope to keep capital punishment within their societies. Retentionists should look to lower the levels of human freedom, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence within the society.

These results have very important implications for future capital punishment researchers. The results show that four of Hofstede's six dimensions were significant in explaining the variance of capital punishment. Furthermore, the results indicate the likelihood of a country having or not having capital punishment is influenced by national culture. This is crucial because culture's impact on capital punishment cannot be ignored by future research regarding capital punishment. More research needs to be conducted on this relationship, but this study illustrates that there is definitely a relationship worthy of exploration.

Additionally, it is worth noting that human freedom explains a large percent of the variance in capital punishment. These results suggest that human freedom has a significant impact on the likelihood of a country having capital punishment. Much like national culture, the significance of human freedom in capital punishment cannot be ignored in future studies. However, Cato's "Human Freedom Index" is such a large index with many subcategories, so it is difficult to decipher what factor of human freedom is most significant. Therefore, significantly more research needs to be done regarding this relationship in order to explain what part of human freedom is most significant in explaining the variance of capital punishment.

Human freedom mediates the effect of long-term orientation, power distance, and economic wealth. This mediation suggests that culture and economic wealth make an impact in explaining a country's level of human freedom and probability of having or not having capital punishment. Future research should further explore the relationships between human freedom and the significant antecedents to uncover their impact on the variance of capital punishment.

These results could also have potential implications for international investors and traders. In a study by Colin M. Barry, K. Chad Clay, and Michael E. Flynn (2013), the researchers attempt to uncover what role human rights plays in foreign direct investment. They ultimately found that countries with higher levels of human rights have greater inflows of foreign direct investment. Countries with low levels of human freedom have much lower levels of inflows from foreign direct investment because investors do not want their reputations to suffer by investing in a country that has poor human rights records. Human freedom and human rights are basically one in the same since Cato's "Human Freedom Index" accounts for human rights. This is illustrated in my study, that countries with lower levels of human freedom have a higher probability of having capital punishment. Consequently, future research should look into the potential relationship between capital punishment and foreign direct investment.

It is important to note that this study does have important implications, but it also has limitations. For example, this study is limited by the number of variables that are not included within the study. While these variables explain 38.5% of the variance in capital punishment, 61.5% of the variance is unexplained. Future research should aim to uncover what other variables, not in this study, explain that large percentage of the variance that cannot be explained. Previous studies have posed that other variables like religion and education might play a role in the probability of a society having the death penalty (Greenberg and West 2008; Britt 1998). However, the studies by Garland, West, Britt, and myself are not enough research regarding this topic. More still needs to be done to uncover all of the relationships with capital punishment. This study is limited by the sample size of 70 countries. Since the sample size is not incredibly large, it is not an accurate depicter of what GDP/cap/ppp is. The median GDP/cap/ppp (CIA 2020) is approximately USD

\$15,000. However, the mean for the 70 countries used in this sample is USD \$28,920. This suggests that data was not available for all countries. The sample size of 70 countries had a GDP per capita average that was skewed higher than the actual average.

In closing, more research needs to be conducted on these relationships to have a better understanding of why certain countries support or oppose the death penalty.

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