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TRUST AND DISTRUST AS DISTINCT CONCEPTS: WHY STUDYING DISTRUST IN  
INSTITUTIONS IS IMPORTANT

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**Abstract**

Scholarship of trust in institutions has tended to see trust and distrust as opposites on one continuum. Theoretical advances have challenged this view, and now consider trust and distrust as different constructs, and thus, as constructs with different characteristics and partly different determinants. Current empirical research on trust in government has yet done little to incorporate these findings, and has largely continued to rely on traditional survey items assuming a trust-distrust continuum. We rely on the literature in organisation studies and political science to argue in favor of measuring citizen trust and distrust as distinct concepts and discuss future research challenges.

*Keywords: distrust, trust, trust in government,*

## TRUST AND DISTRUST AS DISTINCT CONCEPTS: WHY STUDYING DISTRUST IN INSTITUTIONS IS IMPORTANT

Citizen trust and distrust in government and the public sector are receiving increasing attention. A common motivation for such studies has been the supposed decline in public trust. Notwithstanding limited empirical evidence about low or declining trust (Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek & Bouckaert 2008), two things stand out in the public administration and political science literature: one is an active debate about the need for trust; where some argue that citizen trust is good and distrust destructive, while others argue that citizen distrust in government is rational and trust naïve (Parry 1976; Hardin, 2002). The other is the assumption that, trust and distrust are polar opposites on one continuum. In this article, we argue, in line with Lewicki et al. (1998) that trust and distrust should be treated as separate constructs and that both trust and distrust may be present at the same time. This observation from organization studies has not been adopted yet by trust research in public administration and public policy. This has important implications for the way empirical data are collected and interpreted. This debate is not unlike the conceptual arguments about the relationship between trust and control. Most authors in public policy and public administration appear to assume that presence of controls equals presence of distrust (e.g., Rosanvallon 2008, Krouwel, Abts 2007).

In this article we use insights from trust research in other fields to develop an argument that clarifies distinctions between trust and distrust in government. An important consequence of our argument is that in public administration and public policy research trust and distrust should be measured using different survey items, and more qualitative research is needed to explore possible differences in antecedents and consequences of trust versus distrust. This will allow a more in-depth analysis of the determinants and effects of trust and distrust in institutions. It might for instance be possible that absence of corruption is a factor that reduces distrust in the public sector, but not one that creates active trust. We are using recent discussions in organization studies and e-commerce to argue for making a theoretical and empirical distinction between trust and distrust.

In the first section we argue that to overcome the contradictions in the theories about citizen trust in government we need to clarify definitions. We start with a definition of trust that captures most of the different perspectives taken on citizen trust in government. We then introduce different democratic theories in relation to trust and distrust. In the next section we address how empirically to study citizen trust and distrust, their antecedents and consequences, referring to empirical work done in organization research. We conclude in the final section with implications for government policies and academic research in a comparative perspective.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### *Defining trust and distrust*

Some authors define trust as an attitude (e.g. Rousseau et al, 1998), others as an action or as a process (e.g. Möllering, 2006). Trust has been studied in many disciplines, such as psychology, economics, sociology, political science and organization studies. Möllering (2006) has studied trust in all these disciplines, except political science, and concluded that trust may have three different bases yet none may provide certainty about the trustees' future behaviour. Möllering's key point is that none of the three bases – reasons, routines or reflexivity – can ever provide certainty about the trusted party's future actions. Trust, therefore, inevitably requires a 'leap of faith' in which the irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability are suspended. According to Möllering (2006: 111) trust is based on

reason, routine and reflexivity, suspending irreducible social vulnerability and uncertainty *as if* they were favourably resolved, and maintaining thereby a state of favourable expectation towards the actions and intentions of more or less specific others.

In political science, citizen or public trust in government has in fact also been defined using these different bases of trust. Hardin, and his colleagues in many of the Russell Sage

Foundation's publications on trust and distrust, have focused on the cognitive bases, i.e. reason (e.g., Hardin 2002, Larson 2004, Ullmann-Margalit 2002). Other authors have focused on the cultural and moral foundations of trust, i.e. routines (e.g., Fukuyama 1995). Krouwel and Abts (2007) have explicitly brought the reflexive basis of trust and distrust to our attention.

The 'as if' in the definition refers to actors who 'interact with each other as if ignorance, doubt and dangers that exist alongside knowledge, convictions and assurances are unproblematic and can be set aside, at least for the time being' (Möllering 2006: 115). When the actor cannot make the leap of faith, this is not automatically distrust, but rather low trust. Distrust also has bases in reason, routines and reflexivity that lead to negative expectations towards the actions and intentions of more or less specific others. Distrust, however, does not require a leap of faith or suspension. We discuss this in more detail in the next section.

#### *Citizen trust or distrust as more appropriate?*

Democratic and public administration theories contradict each other in what citizens' attitude towards government should be. Some argue that trust is positive and distrust is destructive, while others argue that distrust is rational and trust naïve.

A dominant assumption in the current public administration debate about citizen trust in government is that it is considered important to have high-trusting citizens. Low trust is seen as indicator that the government must be doing something wrong or that public services don't deliver, and is a reason for worry because low trust is seen to be associated with a decrease in civic behaviour and undesirable voting behaviour (e.g., Nye, Zelikow & King 1997). High levels of public trust are regarded as evidence that the government performs effectively, efficiently and democratically. Trust is inevitably important in democratic society, because democracies rely on the voluntary compliance of citizens to authorities' rules (Lenard 2008).

This makes trust central. Citizens must trust that government officials have the public interest in mind; and citizens must trust each other to abide by the democratically agreed laws. Yet this trust is not blind nor naïve. Citizens must remain vigilant, without this being distrust. This vigilance ‘is reflected in a set of institutions and active citizenry’ (Lenard 2008: 312). The specific role of distrust in political and administrative systems is often ignored in these debates.

The political literature, especially classical liberal theory, suggests that high levels of public trust are risky because they hollow out checks and balances in a democratic polity. Many political systems are therefore explicitly built on distrust (Parry 1976). A certain level of public distrust with government is thus not a problem, because it guarantees control (Kim 2005). Having too much trust in government can be potentially dangerous as it leads to absence of control. Whether trust is desirable and necessary for a political-administrative system to function actually depends on how this system defines itself. In a classic-liberal approach it would be inappropriate to actually trust a government (Parry 1976). It may therefore be rational not to trust the government (Hardin 2002, Levi 1998). According to Hardin (2002), a decline of levels of citizen trust may not be a problem. ‘Indeed, it may even be a sign that citizens are becoming increasingly sophisticated about the conditions of trust’ (Warren 1999c: 6). In terms of the bases of trust in Möllering’s definition, increased knowledge about government erodes the basis of routine generalized trust in government. Routine trust in government, in this perspective, is naïve.

Warren points to the innovative impact of distrust, ‘democratic progress is most often sparked by distrust of authorities’ (Warren 1999b: 310). The innovations this distrust triggers usually involve ‘new ways of monitoring and controlling those in power, on the assumption that, as a rule, those with power cannot or ought not to be trusted’ (Warren 1999b: 310). He recognized though, that there are also ‘kinds of trust that are good for democracy ... [they] are necessary to [democracy’s] stability, viability and vitality’ (Warren 1999b: 310).

Krouwel and Abts (2007) continuum of five attitudes of citizens towards government is indicative of how many political scientists approach trust and distrust (confidence/trust-scepticism-distrust-cynicism-alienation). The first attitude on the trust-end of the continuum is called confidence. ‘confidence, despite its conditionality, frees individuals from the need of constant monitoring and thus can ultimately take the form of a naïve and unquestioned leap of faith’ (Krouwel, Abts 2007: 258). This is close to blind or naïve trust, based on routine only and not on reasons or reflexivity (Möllering 2006). Scepticism is described as ‘an attitude of reserve, where both trust and distrust are temporarily suspended’ (Krouwel, Abts 2007: 259). This appears to be a state of both low trust and low distrust. While routine and reason provide insufficient basis for trust, or distrust, reflexivity is very important: sceptics monitor, differentiate and are receptive to observation (Krouwel, Abts 2007). On the other end of the spectrum, both cynicism and alienation are firmly based on routine generalized distrust of government and low reflexivity. Reasons have no effect (Krouwel, Abts 2007). The middle ground is called distrust and is considered a desirable state, as distrusting citizens ‘will voice discontent, participate in the political debate and mobilize themselves against the government of the day’ (Krouwel, Abts 2007: 268). Most theories would agree that citizens that act like this are desirable for a vibrant democracy, but we question whether it is correct to call them distrusting citizens. In Möllering’s (2006) terminology, they are reflexive trustors.

*Trust and distrust as polar opposites or separate constructs?*

Early trust scholarship has treated trust and distrust in institutions as two polar opposites on a continuum (Bigley, Pearce 1998). It regards distrust mainly as an absence of trust. More recent research treats them as conceptually different concepts (Bigley, Pearce 1998, Liu, Wang 2010). Theoretical advances have challenged this one-dimensional view from the early 1990s on (Sitkin, Roth 1993, Lewicki, Bunker 1996). Trust and distrust are now increasingly being considered as different constructs. It has also been proposed that trust and distrust have

different characteristics and determinants (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998). Many of these insights from organization studies have not yet filtered through to public administration or public policy research. Current empirical research on trust in government has yet done little to incorporate these findings, and has largely continued to rely on traditional survey items assuming a trust-distrust continuum.

Although Hardin (e.g., 2002, 2004) did not see trust and distrust as separate constructs, he did emphasize that low trust is not the same as active distrust. In his cognitive account of trust: 'If I trust you, I have specific grounds for the trust. In parallel, if I distrust you, I have specific grounds for the distrust. I could be in a state of such ignorance about you, however, that I neither trust nor distrust you' (Hardin 2002: 90).

An early distinction between trust and distrust as different concepts can be found in organization studies. Sitkin and Roth suggested in 1993 'that in organizations, trust rests on a foundation of expectations about an employee's ability to complete task assignments reliably (task reliability), whereas distrust is engendered when expectations about the compatibility of an employee's beliefs and values with the organization's cultural values are called into question (generalized value incongruence).' (Sitkin, Roth 1993: 367-8). Thus, rather than merely being an expression of low trust, 'distrust is engendered when an individual or group is perceived as not sharing key cultural values.' (Sitkin, Roth 1993: 371) .

In their 1998 article on institutional trust, organization scholars Lewicki, McAllister and Bies argued that 'low distrust is not the same as high trust, and high distrust is not the same as low trust' (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998: 425), thereby giving rise to a new stream of research in organization studies and e-commerce. Because of this difference, they argue, reasons for trusting and distrusting are therefore different as well. 'We argue that trust and distrust are separate but linked dimensions. Moreover, we propose that trust and distrust are not opposite ends of a single continuum. There are elements that contribute to the growth and decline of



trust, and there are elements that contribute to the growth and decline of distrust.’ (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998: 339-40).

In making this distinction, they refer to the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. In Luhmann’s classic work on trust, distrust (*Mißtrauen*) is described not as the opposite of trust, but as a functional equivalent. He explains this by referring to trust’s and distrust’s main social function: the reduction of social complexity. With trust, this is done through positive expectations. If there is distrust, this reduction cannot take place in the same way (Luhmann 1968: 69). Reduction of uncertainty is then done using negative strategies (e.g. defining the other as the enemy, building up emergency reserves, attacking, etc.). Reductions of complexity/ uncertainty are generally more complex when based on negative expectations, than on positive expectations – trusting is just a much lighter way of living (Luhmann 1968: 70).

The fundamental difference between trust and distrust becomes visible, when we treat trust and distrust as fundamental dispositions. A ‘disposition to trust means the extent to which one displays a consistent tendency to be willing to depend on general others across a broad spectrum of situations and persons. (Harrison McKnight, Chervany 2001: 38). Contrary to trust, distrust can thus be seen as ‘an actor’s assured expectation of intended harm from the other’ (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998: 446), something which goes obviously beyond a mere absence of trust. A mere absence of trust, or not trusting someone (or an institution) does not mean actively distrusting that person or institution (Ullmann-Margalit 2002). It follows that the opposite of trust is an absence of trust; the opposite of distrust is, likewise, an absence of distrust.

This means that distrust is not the absence of trust, but an attitude in itself. It is an actual expectation that another actor cannot be relied upon, and will engage in harmful behaviour. While trust consists of ‘confident positive expectations regarding another’s conduct’, distrust

consists of ‘confident negative expectations regarding another’s conduct’ (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998:439). These expectations colour all aspects of interaction, and influence even the most basic perceptions of the other, resulting in a very biased view of ‘reality’. Just like trust, the decision to distrust may be an established way of thinking, of life, that gets strengthened in social life, through a self-fulfilling prophecy (Luhmann 1968: 73). The same objective situation can lead to a decision to trust or to distrust, through selective use of proofs and clues, instigated by one’s basic disposition (*Einstellung*) to trust or distrust (Luhmann 1968: 74-5). This disposition is not just a personal one, but one that is reinforced by one’s environment. Sztompka, in his research on new democracies in Central Europe, also stresses this social context within which decisions to trust or distrust are taken: ‘When a culture of trust -or culture of distrust- appears, the people are constrained to exhibit trust or distrust in all their dealings, independent of individual convictions, and departures from such a cultural demand meet with a variety of sanctions’ (Sztompka 1996). A culture of distrust is characterised by ‘a pervasive, generalized climate of suspicion’ (Sztompka 1998: 22), leading to alienation and passivism.

#### *Simultaneous trust and distrust in interpersonal relationships*

When trust and distrust are different concepts, this means that trust and distrust can co-exist because they are not opposites. ‘Trust and distrust are separate constructs that may exist simultaneously.’ (Harrison McKnight, Chervany 2001: 29). McKnight and Chervany illustrate this apparent contradiction by giving the World War II collaboration between Stalin and Roosevelt as an example (Harrison McKnight, Chervany 2001), where both parties trust each other, yet distrust each other at the same time. Trust and distrust may coexist in a relationship, both referring to a different aspect or quality of the relationship (Liu, Wang 2010, Six 2005).

Lewicki et al. even go as far as saying that the combination high trust/high distrust might be more prevalent in relationships than originally expected, where a combination between high

trust/low distrust has generally been seen as logical combination (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998: 477). This combination, however, means people experience a certain deal of ambivalence in their relationships (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998:449). The large degree of middle-category or don't know responses in most surveys on trust in institutions provide further evidence of such ambivalence (Van de Walle 2004: 233-4). Consider for instance this extract from Eliasoph's micro-level study of on political engagement: 'When I asked the standard survey question "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" many volunteers said something like what Carolyn said, "Most of the time. Well, at least I'd like to think it's most of the time. Of course, I'm not so sure it really *is*. But I hope it is. So, I'd say 'most of the time'. Yes, put 'most of the time'' (Eliasoph 1998: 20).

A similar misconception exists around the relation between trust and control. Many theories appear to assume that trust and control are substitutes, in other words, if you control you do not trust and if you trust you do not control. Control appears to directly imply distrust. More specifically, we argue that those theories that propose that citizen distrust is the rational, appropriate approach to democratic governance appear to assume that trust and control are substitutes and that control is seen as a sign of distrust (e.g. Rosanvallon, 2008, Krouwel, Abts, 2007, Warren 1999a), So as soon as one puts in place controls, one distrusts. Lenard (2008), on the other hand, appears to assume that trust and control may strengthen each other in creating vigilant democratic governance. Recent organization theory is supporting the perspective that trust and control may complement each other. Control may positively affect and strengthen trust, provided certain conditions are met (Das, Teng 1998, Weibel et al. 2009, Weibel 2007, Das, Teng 2001). Although he did not study the relationship between trust and control explicitly, Lindenberg (2000) addressed the same issue by arguing that you first need to take away distrust before you can begin to build trust. He introduced the notion of legitimate distrust situations, situations where 'any explicit or implicit promise [...] is blatantly against the self-interest of the promising party' (Lindenberg 2000: 12). Because the

distrust is seen as legitimate, that is ‘reasonable observers would say that any other reasonable person put into this situation’ would judge similarly, remedies can be relationally neutral, meaning that the distrusting individual can ‘claim the necessity of remedies, pinpoint to a menu of solutions and show good faith at the same time’ (Lindenberg 2000: 12). In other words, the introduction of certain controls may be considered legitimate and not a sign of distrust if the temptations are considered too great. This is the case in democratic theory and public administration theory where citizens grant large powers towards government and public officials. Thus, the controls that need to be put into place in democracies allow citizens to no longer actively distrust government. This would suggest that these controls, e.g., measures to combat corruption and theft of public monies, cronyism, conflict of interests, will mainly act to reduce distrust and not, or to a lesser extent, increase trust.

Lenard’s (2008) notion of citizen vigilance mentioned above is an illustration of how legitimate distrust situations in democracies may be dealt with. ‘Vigilance *does not require* an attitude of distrust towards our legislators and the vigilance we display in constraining our legislators *is not inconsistent* with trusting them’ (Lenard 2008: 326, italics in original).

Rosanvallon came to similar solutions to the problem that democracies face as Lenard, but called them ‘ways in which distrust may be expressed’ (Rosanvallon 2008: xi). He calls it organizing distrust. We prefer Lenard’s position, because of the effect of a distrusting attitude vis-à-vis a trusting attitude. A distrusting attitude sets in motion different perceptions and expectations and leads to distrusting behaviours, whereas a trusting attitude sets in motion trusting and more constructive behaviours (cf. Zand, 1972). This has important implications for government actions, which will be discussed at the end.

So, just like trust and distrust are not two ends of one continuum, trust and control are also not substitutes. Both may be high at the same time. In fact, controls may be needed to take away legitimate distrust and create the space for active trust to be built. When citizens thus retain some trust and avoid active distrust, they are likely to stay engaged with the democratic and

political processes, voicing their support or concerns and possibly showing some degree of loyalty (Hirschman 1970). This is generally considered positive for democracy and public administration. If on the other hand, their active distrust causes them to become disengaged (Braithwaite 2009, Braithwaite, Makkai & Braithwaite 2007) or alienated (Krouwel, Abts 2007), they are likely to exit the regular democratic processes. This is generally considered destructive to democracy and public administration.

Thus, what Krouwel and Abts (2007) call *distrusting citizens*, we would call *trusting and vigilant citizens*, with their trust based on reasons and reflexivity, not on routine generalized trust. Their constant vigilance keeps them alert that controls are in place to take away legitimate distrust situations, so that active distrust is taken away and active trust may be built.

In sum, we argue that trust and distrust should be conceptualized as two separate constructs and that the presence of controls does not imply the presence of active distrust. Controls may help to take away active distrust and thus enable the building up of active trust.

### **Empirically studying trust and distrust**

In empirical studies of trust and distrust, the above argument leads to three issues: Measuring trust and distrust separately; exploring differences in determinants of trust and distrust; and exploring differences in consequences of trust and distrust.

One important implication of our, so far conceptual, argument is that researchers should start to measure citizen trust and distrust in government as separate constructs and stop interpreting low scores on trust measures as indications of the presence of active distrust. If we, as we did in the previous sections, assume that (absence of) trust and distrust are different constructs, then they also require a different operationalization and different items (cf. Dietz, Den Hartog 2006). The effect of the empirical tradition in public trust research is that low trust is treated as high distrust, and high trust as absence of distrust. In other words, trust and distrust as two

polar opposites on a continuum. While the theoretical debate on the difference between trust and distrust (and their antecedents) started in the early 1990s in organizational research (Sitkin, Roth 1993, Lewicki, Bunker 1996), it appears not yet to have fully reached empirical public trust research (Markova, Linell & Gillespie 2008): 'This might stem from the fact that the past literature has implicitly treated distrust as being at the opposite end of trust on the same conceptual spectrum. Consequently, evidence of high trust was always regarded as being that of low distrust, and outcomes of high trust would be identical to those of low distrust.' (Cho 2006: 25).

#### *Empirical evidence from organization research*

Some initial empirical steps are being taken to empirically test the theoretical idea that trust and distrust are separate concepts. Most of this research is currently being done in the field of marketing (Cho 2006, McKnight, Kacmar & Choudhury 2004). Cho, using Lewicki et al.'s distinction between trust and distrust, developed two distinct scales for measuring trust and distrust in internet-based customer-vendor relations, and found that factors fostering trust (notably benevolence) are different from those reducing distrust (notably competence) (Cho 2006). This appears to confirm Sitkin and Roth's (1993) findings. The consequence of this finding is that different strategies are needed to stimulate commercial internet transactions. Liu and Wang used a simple 2x4-item scale to distinguish between trust and distrust, and found that trust and distrust have different roles in negotiations during commercial transactions in generating anger or compassion (Liu, Wang 2010). McKnight et al. (2004) for example, studied differential effects on dispositional trust and distrust on perceptions in e-commerce transactions. They argue that trust and distrust are based on different sets of emotions. More specifically, they speak about trust as being 'cool and collected' and distrust as 'fiery and frenzied'. Or, they state that 'distrust is based on fear and worry, while trust is based on feelings of calm and security' (McKnight, Kacmar & Choudhury 2004: 37).

*Empirical evidence from public administration and political science*

While political science has devoted considerable attention to concepts such as alienation, cynicism, scepticism etc. as concepts different from trust, these theoretical distinctions only occasionally make it to empirical studies (Cook, Gronke 2008), and such distinctions are still largely absent from public administration research. Approaches to measuring public trust in public administration research have been relatively one-dimensional, often using a single trust item. One major cause for this phenomenon is the relative scarcity of primary data in public administration research, leading to a necessary reliance on secondary datasets developed for policy and not for research purposes (Bouckaert, Van de Walle & Kampen 2005).

Contrary to theoretical and conceptual developments, which now tend to see trust and distrust as different constructs both with high and low values (Saunders, Thornhill 2004), distinctions between trust and distrust have received considerably less attention in empirical research. Where attention has explicitly gone to the concept of distrust in social and political research, this happened indirectly. One stream of such research has focused on conceptually distinguishing between trust and related concepts such as political inefficacy, cynicism, alienation, etc., where the latter are generally treated as dimensions of the wider trust concept, or as trust antonyms, signifying an absence of trust (Hetherington 1998: 792).

The second stream is mainly interested in the behavioural effects of distrust (Levi, Stoker 2000). This includes abstaining from the vote, voting for non-incumbents (Hetherington 1998), lower tax and legal compliance (Braithwaite, Levi 1998), participation in protest movements, or in new types of political participation or system-challenging behaviour (Levi, Stoker 2000, Muller, Jukam 1977), or other types of resistance against government influence (Kim 2005: 628). In most of these approaches, it has been assumed that there is a trust-distrust continuum, where attitudes such as cynicism and alienation, and various types of protest behavior emerge when trust sinks below a certain level.

There is a relatively long empirical tradition in measuring trust. Researchers have devoted considerable attention to testing items and to comparing alternative survey items. This has resulted in two main traditions in the measurement of trust in institutions. One is very common in European social and political research, and in policy research. This approach relies on a Likert scale ranging from low to high trust or confidence, or vice versa. It exists both as a generic single item construct, and as a list of items measuring trust in a series of institutions. In this approach, low levels of trust are seen as distrust. This approach is also common in international surveys such as the European Social Survey, the World Values Surveys, or Eurobarometer, partly because of the relative ease of administering these items.

The other tradition is that pioneered in the American National Election Studies (NES), from the 1950s on. The NES use a political trust scale based on a number of items. It consists of one dimension, running from high trust to high distrust (also referred to as political cynicism) (Miller 1974). The NES index has been extensively tested for reliability and validity (Craig, Niemi & Silver 1990), and consist of four items. The strong tradition in the measurement of trust has led to scales and items that have been thoroughly tested, and that allow for cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons. At the same time, they have had a fossilizing effect on trust research, because they inhibited change. The desire to maximize comparability has resulted in a situation where much of the trust research and resulting questionnaire construction is measurement-driven rather than theory-driven resulting in a strong 'imbalance between measurement and theory' (Weatherford 1992: 151). Specific issues with the NES items relate to their focus on short-term evaluations, and a tendency to exaggerate disaffection (Cook & Gronke, 2005). Additional issues relate to the problems with purely quantitative measurements of trust and distrust. We know for instance that survey answers on trust in institutions can be very sensitive to issues such as question order and question wording (Van de Walle, Van Ryzin 2011), or the reversal of answering scales (Friedman, Herksovitz & Pollack 1994). Few of the theoretical advances in trust research, as outlined the previous



section, have therefore been introduced to the more empirical social and political research, which has continued to rely on conventional indicators.

*Exploring differences in determinants of trust and distrust*

Sitkin and Roth (1993) suggested that trust and distrust are different concepts, and that therefore they are created by different determinants. Remediating distrust and responding to trust violations requires different approaches. More specifically, they emphasized that legalistic and regulatory approaches may be helpful for restoring trust, but not for remediating distrust (Sitkin, Roth 1993). Liu and Wang demonstrated empirically that ‘it is evident that trust and distrust are associated with distinct antecedents and consequences’ (Liu, Wang 2010: 28). If trust and distrust are distinct constructs, then the determinants are likely to be distinct as well. This means we need instruments not just to measure the extent of trust, but also the extent of distrust, and especially what causes trust and distrust.

This is especially important for two reasons. One is that the predisposition to trust or distrust is generally correlated with other orientations (Kramer 1999). The frequent finding of correlations of trust (in government) with feelings of insecurity, or with dissatisfaction with one’s own life is good evidence in this respect. Further, explaining distrust requires more insight into the types of distrust. Trust has been analyzed, and different types of trust have been distinguished, with for instance Lewis and Weigert’s distinction between cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions of trust (Lewis, Weigert 1985), or Lewicki and Bunker’s calculus-, knowledge- and identity-based types of trust (Lewicki, Bunker 1996)(see Van de Walle 2010 for an application of this distinction to public management). Yet the same has not happened to this extent for distrust (see also Harrison McKnight, Chervany 2001: 44, for an exception).

Just as was the case in Lewicki et al.’s (1998) seminal paper, our trigger to start looking into differences between trust and distrust also comes from Herzberg’s distinction between

satisfiers and dissatisfiers in his work on job attitudes. Rather than treating job motivation as a single construct, Herzberg distinguishes between factors that cause job satisfaction, and those that cause dissatisfaction. The work was based on a review of earlier studies on job attitudes (Herzberg et al. 1957). In their actual studies, they ‘[...] decided to ask people to tell [...] stories about times when they felt exceptionally good or bad about their jobs’ (Herzberg, Mausner & Bloch Snyderman 1959: 17). More specifically, they approached workers with the following question: ‘Think of a time in the past when you felt especially good or bad about your job. It may have been on this job or any other. Can you think of such a high or low point in your feelings about your job? Please tell me about it’ (Herzberg, Mausner & Bloch Snyderman 1959: 20).

These interviews lead them to distinguish between satisfiers and dissatisfiers. Satisfiers or motivators are factors that lead to satisfaction. In job attitudes research, such factors include recognition, the work itself, or responsibility. Dissatisfiers or hygiene factors are factors that do not create satisfaction, but merely help to avoid dissatisfaction. Examples of dissatisfiers are company policy, supervision, salary etc. (Herzberg, Mausner & Bloch Snyderman 1959).

This means satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposites. Taking away dissatisfiers therefore does not lead to satisfaction, but merely reduces dissatisfaction. Herzberg concluded ‘that the satisfier factors are much more likely to increase job satisfaction than they would be to decrease job satisfaction but that the factors that relate to job dissatisfaction very infrequently act to increase job satisfaction.’ (Herzberg, Mausner & Bloch Snyderman 1959: 80).

The distinction made by Herzberg offers the possibility to draw parallels with trust research: what are the drivers that determine the public trust in government, and are these drivers different from those that determine active distrust? In other words, rather than using a trust-distrust continuum, we propose to distinguish between trust/no-trust and distrust/no distrust.

*Exploring differences in consequences of trust and distrust*

A second reason why it is important to not just study trust but also distrust, is that levels of trust and distrust are also related to behaviours, and do not just remain attitudes. Evidence from the political trust literature suggests that those with low political trust are more permissive towards tax-breaking behaviour (Mariën, Hooghe 2011), more likely to participate in protest politics (Mariën, Hooghe 2010), and more likely to vote for extreme right parties or cast a blank or invalid vote (Hooghe, Mariën & Pauwels 2011). Low levels of trust (generally mistakenly called 'distrust' in political science) do not necessarily lead to changes in behaviour. When there is no change in behaviour, then there appears to be little reason for government to worry about distrust. When, however, there is active distrust, and citizens alter their behavior, such distrust has important consequences for government.

The different responses in terms of voice and exit mentioned above are also about different consequences.

**Conclusion and implications**

In this article, we reviewed the emerging literature in organisation studies and political science that treats trust and distrust as different constructs. Whereas most scholarship of trust in institutions has tended to consider trust and distrust as opposites on a continuum, more recent advances have focused more explicitly on distrust as a concept different from trust. In this article, we clarified the conceptual distinction between trust and distrust, and challenged the dominant approach that tends to view trust as the normatively desirable option. It shows that distrust is not the opposite of trust. Luhmann (1968) showed how trust and distrust provide two functional equivalents for coping with dealing with social complexity, which lead to different expectations and actions. Lewicki et al (1998) showed how both constructs may be present simultaneously and hypothesized that each may have different antecedents and consequences. Subsequent empirical research in organization and marketing provide support for their model.

This has implication for research on the effects of trust and distrust on citizens' behaviours, and on the determinants of such attitudes. These findings have important implications both for governments that wish to remedy low trust or high distrust, and for researchers who wish to obtain a deeper insight into what causes distrust, and who those are who have a fundamentally distrusting attitude towards government.

*Implications for government actions*

Our argument has important implications for governments. Active distrust is different from mere low trust, and may therefore have different consequences, and may require a different set of policy solutions. The policy options available across countries also depend on the national trust or distrust dispositions, thus this is relevant in comparative policy analysis.

Actively distrusting citizens are a risk factor for governments, because their basic attitude towards government is one of distrust, which impacts on their perceptions and possibly also on their behaviours. Such a disposition to distrust generates suspicion vis-à-vis all government communications and actions. Whereas trusting citizens resolve uncertainty in their interaction with government through trust, distrusting people use suspicion as their basic attitude. Finishing one's relationship with the other is the most certain way to eliminate dependence, and this uncertainty. Whereas trust lowers transaction costs, distrust increases them or even makes transactions impossible. While trust helps governments to implement policies, or to find support for policies, a mere lack of trust does not necessarily hinder the implementation. Distrust however, may make the implementation of certain policies that infringe upon people's lives quasi impossible. Research on trust in government has revealed effects of low trust on rule compliance, tax paying, voting behaviour etc. Most research up to now has tended to focus on more moderate expressions of low trust, such as declining tax discipline or voting for protest parties. In a situation of distrust, some of these behaviours may become more extreme, eventually even resulting in a withdrawal from the state. Such a withdrawal can be full or partial, and may consist of behaviours such as abstaining from

voting, tax evasion, non take-up of public services, refusing to be registered in government databases, or a physical withdrawal. It is therefore crucial to know whether citizens merely display a low level of trust, or are actually actively distrusting. Such extreme disaffection has received little attention in research, partly because deep suspicion makes access to research subjects difficult.

Finding 'solutions' for distrust is harder than finding 'solutions' for low trust. In a case of low trust, the basic disposition towards government is still one of trust. In the case of distrust, this basic trusting disposition is no longer present: All government actions are interpreted from a basic disposition of distrust and suspicion, which influences attitudes and perceptions. Well-intended actions by government are hence either not perceived at all, or perceived as malicious. These dispositions are different across countries and this impacts on the scope of policy alternatives available to governments. Compare for instance the low levels of trust in government in Central European countries, to very high levels in the Nordic area.

Because we are talking about broad dispositions to trust or distrust, identifying specific reasons for such trust or distrust is difficult. A 'Disposition to trust means the extent to which one displays a consistent tendency to be willing to depend on general others across a broad spectrum of situations and persons. (Harrison McKnight, Chervany 2001: 38). A disposition to distrust, therefore, is a general tendency to be suspicious of any government actions, also when such actions are initiated by government in order to remediate distrust. Distrusting citizens are unlikely to believe in government's good intentions. Traditional fixes for low trust, such as increasing transparency, initiating anti-corruption legislation, or closing the gap between politicians and citizens through involving the latter in decision making are therefore unlikely remedies for reversing active distrust. Such actions are seen as factors further confirming the distrusting citizen's suspicions about government ('if they initiate anti-corruption laws, it must mean they are corrupt', 'if politicians want to talk to us, this must mean they want something from us'). Beginning to trust government is considered by these citizens to be a very risky strategy that only increases the uncertainty in their environment.

Because active distrust (just as trust) part of a disposition, specific actions and information will do little to change it in the short term, because all such specific action will be interpreted within the broader disposition. We for instance often see in research on trust in government a strong relationship between attitudes towards government and more general attitudes such as satisfaction with one's own life, ethnocentric attitudes, feelings of insecurity, or other emotions. Combating distrust therefore requires a strategy that is not limited to factors directly related to government or government –citizen interactions. Actions needed for trust building are different from actions effective in combating distrust.

#### *Implications for research*

Our suggestion to treat trust and distrust as different concepts, based on a theoretical-conceptual review has a number of implications for future research on trust and especially distrust. Current research has a predilection for large-N quantitative research, and tends to concentrate on general trends in an entire population. A wealth of empirical survey-based data has become available in recent decades, allowing for an analysis of covariates and determinants of levels of trust. Much of the political science research has in addition also concentrated on dimensions in trusting behaviour, through distinguishing between concepts such as cynicism, scepticism, alienation, etc. (Krouwel, Abts 2007, Cook, Gronke 2005). In public administration, such conceptual distinctions are not common, or even non-existent. A first avenue for improving research would be to develop a much more comprehensive way of measuring trust and distrust in public administration and government questionnaires, beyond the commonly used one-dimensional trust Likert-scale. These new scales also need to take cross-country equivalence of concepts into account (see also Miller and Mitamura, 2003). One such common conceptual distinction, the distinction between trust and distrust, to give but one example, is for instance entirely irrelevant in some languages, simply because the two concepts are translated into the same word. Recent large-N studies are often comparative across nations. Such comparative research would benefit from distinguishing trust and distrust

explicitly to allow for much more fine-grained analyses of antecedents and consequences of trust respectively distrust.

A second expansion of trust research would be to devote more attention to measurement equivalence issues in international comparative research. This includes treating ambivalence, non-opinions and middle categories in scales seriously if a questionnaire is only using one single trust item (Eliasoph 1998, Martinez, Gaius & Craig 2007). In addition, when measuring trust in international comparative surveys, recent developments in the survey literature concerning the use of anchoring vignettes need to be taken on board, in order to calibrate findings internationally, and to make cross-national comparisons more meaningful (King et al., 2004).

An additional complication is that survey non-response behaviour tends to covariate with levels of trust, meaning that distrusting sample units are also those who don't participate in surveys (Loosveldt, Carton 2002), making in-depth study of distrust difficult. This calls for a different approach to studying distrust. Earlier, we referred to Herzberg et al.'s research into satisfiers and dissatisfiers. This research was based on in-depth interviews with workers. Such an approach may also be quite useful for research into distrust. Given that distrust as a separate concept is only recently emerging in organization studies, there may be some relevance in organizing a series of in-depth interviews with extremely distrusting respondents – ideally leading to the design of a formal set of items to be included in future large-N studies. Such in-depth interviews allow the researcher not just to look at generic attitudes and their intercorrelations, but also to explore the genesis of general dispositions to trust or to distrust, through reconstructing individual histories of life experiences and interactions with government.

A final implication of our review is that public sectors need to take distrust seriously as a concept meditating the relationship between citizens and government. Most current government surveys tend to consider trust in government as a normatively superior attitude,

and a lack of trust is generally interpreted as a call to action for governments. From such observations of low trust (and distrust, where measured) follow a series of 'fixes' to remediate low trust. Such an approach has led to an excessive focus on trusting citizens and what makes them trusting, to the detriment of studies focusing on distrusting citizens and what makes them distrustful. It furthermore ignores many of the realities governing political and administrative systems, which are grounded on profound distrust. It may be necessary to institutionalize distrust to enable trust. Such an approach is a very common feature in the design of democratic systems which are built on a series of checks and balances, including periodic elections, independent courts and rule of law, or law enforcement institutions (Sztompka 1998). These points are especially important in an internationally comparative context. First because base-line levels of trust differ substantially across countries. Trust – both in institutions and between people - tends to be very low in some countries, and very high in others. This means that the interpretation of trust and distrust needs to take this context into account. Second, political and administrative systems in some countries are to a larger extent based on an assumption of trust than they do in others.

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