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Trust



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Most people tend to have an intuitive understanding of what trust entails, although it is quite hard to put into words. At first sight, trust scholars employ a wide variety of conceptualizations. Some consider trust a *proxy* for other concepts such as political support or legitimacy (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Margalit, 2019; Schraff, 2021; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017); others conceptualize trust as *its own concept* (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; De Juan & Pierskalla, 2016; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016); and some leave it undefined or unconceptualized (Einstein & Glick, 2015; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Hartley & Jarvis, 2020; Kritzinger et al., 2021).

Differing Conceptualizations

Across disciplines, we can find some commonalities in conceptualizations of trust. First, trust describes the quality of a relationship between a

subject (truster) and an object (those to be trusted, the trustee) (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; Citrin & Stoker, 2018). While some conceptualize trust as domain-specific (A trusts B to do X), this is rarely picked up empirically—most will just ask whether a respondent “trusts government,” not on any specific task. Second, the trust relationship is characterized by uncertainty, vulnerability, or even risk (Hanitzsch et al., 2018): the mere use of the word “trust” instead of “support” implies that the trustee holds some form of discretionary power over the truster. Third, trust is distinct from related concepts such as populism and efficacy (Geurkink et al., 2020)—it captures a different underlying attitude with different consequences to these also widely studied concepts.

Surveys and Their Limitations

Trust research is strongly dominated by quantitative surveys. The lack of a joint thick conceptual understanding of trust (that is, scholars often conceptualize trust differently or briefly, if at all) may explain why rather generic measures are the norm. Generalized social trust is conventionally measured by the unspecific measure “Do you think most people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with others?” (Dinesen et al., 2020). Most institutional and political trust measures simply ask respondents directly about the extent to which they trust a range of institutions (such as courts or parliament) (De Juan &

Pierskalla, 2016; Einstein & Glick, 2015; Foster & Frieden, 2017). These measures enable empirically versatile analyses but are conceptually uncertain. Rather, they ask respondents to conceptualize trust themselves. Nevertheless, an undercurrent of studies emphasizes trustworthiness over trust (e.g., Nisbet et al., 2015) or depart more directly from conceptual debates (Bertsou, 2019).

Objects of Trust

While trust is generally analyzed in specific domains (trust in people, in media, in science, in politics, and in organizations), some studies combine different objects of trust into a single measure. Empirically, the connections between trust in different objects vary in strength and may be conditional (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016 for social and political trust; Hanitzsch et al., 2018 for science and political trust; Fitzgerald and Wolak, 2016 for local and national political trust; Einstein & Glick, 2015 for trust in executive and representative organizations; Armingeon & Ceka, 2014, for the European Union). The need to distinguish between different trust objects is therefore best considered a theoretical tool rather than an empirical requirement. Sometimes it can be useful to combine multiple objects in a single measure, sometimes to study them apart, depending on the research question or methodological requirements.

Decline and Absence of Trust

Trust tends to draw particular attention in its absence. There is an ongoing debate about its (long-term) decline or otherwise (Valgarðsson et al. 2025). It also explains why political trust is quite often related to social, political, or economic crises such as COVID (Devine et al., 2021; Hartley & Jarvis, 2020; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021; Esaiasson et al., 2021), economic shocks such as austerity (van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Armingeon & Ceka, 2014), and more structural challenges

such as conspiracy theories and misinformation (Einstein & Glick, 2015), polarization (Hanitzsch et al.; Nisbet et al.), diversity (Dinesen et al., 2020), and populism (Fawzi, 2019).

Causes and Consequences

Trust research has focused most of its attention to explanations. Traditionally, we distinguish between socialization and affective models (that emphasize traits of the truster) and evaluative models (that emphasize traits of the trustee). Although there is evidence for the socialization and affective components that either attenuate or nullify the evaluation mechanism (Foster & Frieden, 2017; Nisbet et al., 2015; Schraff, 2021; Esaiasson et al., 2021), the evaluative model has been dominant in recent decades. There is substantial evidence that trust “responds” to external conditions and policy (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Fawzi, 2019; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Margalit, 2019; Schraff, 2021; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). Procedural elements—such as fairness—tend to play an important role beyond actual outcomes (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; De Juan & Pierskalla, 2016; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; Esaiasson et al., 2021). Yet, despite its dominance, the evaluative model does not find consistent support, particularly when we focus on mechanisms (i.e., *how* evaluations link to trust). The nature of the evaluation and the benchmarks against which people evaluate requires further theoretical clarity and empirical support (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016; see also Fitzgerald and Wolak, 2016). There is also a gap when it comes to the relationship between trust judgments and *trustworthiness*. Normatively, trust judgments should be linked to trustworthiness of the object (such as institutions), and changes in trust become relevant as they signal changes in trustworthiness. This is less researched in existing work.

Finally, much research into trust is motivated by its supposed essential impact on society and democracy (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Yet, despite claims to trust’s importance, the majority of the

studies use trust as an outcome rather than a predictor. Moreover, the studies that exist in this collection suggest that trust has at best a very conditional set of consequences (Devine et al., 2021; Hartley & Jarvis, 2020).

What Is Next for Research on Trust?

Emerging from this review of the 20 most cited articles over the last 10 years, we see 3 related, essential paths forward. First, moving towards a more coherent model of trust is an important next step. There are few agreed-upon *conceptualizations* of trust, whereas theoretical models tend to lack firm underpinning by mechanisms and moderators. Second, we need to move to the understudied consequences of trust, particularly in the face of strong assumptions of these consequences. Third, methodologically, the literature needs to move beyond cross-sectional survey data to focus on mechanisms and causality.

Competing Interest Declaration The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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