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TRUST IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The Role of Informational and Personal Uncertainty

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Abstract

In this chapter, I focus on trust in social institutions such as government, law, and science. I propose that one of the reasons trust in these institutions is decreasing is that many people experience several personal uncertainties. Personal uncertainty can be an alarming experience, making people start responding in more distrusting ways toward those who have power over them and can exclude them from important goods or relationships. Providing good, reliable, and accessible information about how the institutions actually work can help mitigate this process. However, judgments about the working of social institutions are often formed under conditions of high levels of informational uncertainty. This analysis has implications for the science and practice of trust in institutions and the associated constructs of personal and informational uncertainty.

It can be good to critically monitor those who hold positions of power in society. In fact, adopting a somewhat skeptical view on powerholders is underlying important assumptions of the proper functioning of the rule of law and often may be quite appropriate and indeed warranted (Hobbes, 1651). Furthermore, some social institutions do not work that well and thus should be viewed even more critically, with a keen eye toward necessary improvements. This being said, there are several reasons why we should worry about waning trust in institutions that are intended to give social structure and to help our societies to function in open manner and fulfill important human needs (see also Forgas; Kreko; Van Prooijen, this volume). After all, trust in certain norms and values is also needed when we want to maintain social order and stability and keep our societies as open as possible (Popper, 1945).

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In the present paper, I examine trust in institutions such as government, law, and science. I study these issues following the observation that trust in these institutions may be decreasing (Albright, 2018; see also Forgas; Jussim et al.; and Van Prooijen, this volume). Another reason why studying these issues is important has to do with the assumption that many surveys and trust barometers tend to overestimate the level of trust in these institutions and sometimes tend to miss outright, unwarranted distrust in these important domains of human life (Van den Bos, Hulst, Robijn, Romijn, & Wever, in press). Obviously, the subject of trust in social institutions involves many issues. In this chapter, I focus on the role of informational and personal uncertainty.

I propose that one of the reasons why low levels of trust and increasing levels of distrust exist is because many people experience several personal uncertainties. Experiencing personal uncertainty can be quite alarming, making people start responding in more distrustful ways toward those who have power over them and can exclude them from important goods or relationships (Van den Bos, 2018; see also Arriaga & Kumashiro; Murray & Lamarche, this volume). Information about how the institutions work can sometimes help mitigate this process, especially when the information is reliable and easily accessible. However, often people need to form judgments about the functioning of social institutions during high levels of informational uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2011).

In what follows, I define the concept of trust in social institutions and then examine the role that informational and personal uncertainty have in the process by which people form judgments of trust in social institutions. I close this chapter by formulating some warnings and encouraging notes for the science and practice of trust in institutions and the role of informational and personal uncertainty.

Trust

Trust is a complex issue (see, e.g., Alesina & La Ferrera, 2002; Das, Echambadi, McCardle & Luckett, 2003; Evans & Krueger, 2009; Fukuyama, 1995; Nummela, Sulander, Rahkonen & Uutela, 2009; Warren, 1999; Zaheer, McEvily & Perrone, 1998). It has been defined in many ways, building on various conceptual perspectives (see, e.g., Castaldo, Premazzi & Zerbini, 2010; Deutsch, 1958; Ely, 1980; Evans & Krueger, 2009; Gambetta, 1987; Goold, 2002; Johnson, 1996; Kramer, 1999; Kramer & Cook, 2004; Kramer & Isen, 1994; Maddox, 1995; Messick, Wilke, Brewer, Kramer, Zemke, & Lui, 1983; Rotter, 1980; Stanghellini, 2000). In this chapter, I rely on an earlier, Dutch, and more extensive treatment of this issue (Van den Bos, 2011) and define trust as the conviction that others are well-intentioned toward us, will consider our interests if possible, and will not harm us intentionally if they can avoid doing so (Sztompka, 1999; see also Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007).

To a certain extent, people's willingness to rely on others reflects a personal disposition. Their trust propensity is also affected by the situations in which they find themselves (Van den Bos, 2011). Furthermore, a distinction is often drawn in the psychological literature between trust and trustworthiness. For example, Colquitt et al. (2007) regard trust as the intention to accept vulnerability toward a trustee based on positive expectations of his or her actions. Trustworthiness, on the other hand, depends on the ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trustee and, in particular, on the extent to which these characteristics are ascribed to the trustee (Van den Bos, 2011). According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, "trustworthy" means "worthy of trust," while "trust" is defined as "a firm belief in the reliability, honesty, veracity, justice, strength, etc., of a person or thing." This suggests that trust and trustworthiness are closely related in English—with the important distinction that trust is an action performed by the person concerned, while trustworthiness is a characteristic ascribed by that person to the trustee.

Trustworthiness is regarded by Brugman, Oskam, and Oosterlaken (2010) as the most important moral trait for the assessment of others. Trust propensity is a personal characteristic that affects not only the extent of trust itself but also all three perceived pillars of trustworthiness (ability, benevolence, and integrity; Brower, Lester, Korsgaard, & Dineen, 2009). Furthermore, I want to emphasize that it is important to distinguish between trust in social institutions and trust by these institutions. It is striking that while relatively much is known about citizens' trust in institutions, the influence of trust by institutions, such as the government, law, and science, in citizens has not yet been widely investigated. I will come back to this point.

I draw a distinction between trust in institutions and trust in other people. The former is often referred to as "political trust" and the latter as "social trust" (Hetherington, 1998; Newton, 2007; Schyns & Koop, 2010). Political and social trust typically operate in different directions: Political trust is generally vertically oriented, toward people or organizations at a higher hierarchical level (such as politicians or government agencies), while social trust often acts horizontally, toward people at the same social level in one's living environment (such as spouses, partners, or neighbors). I therefore refer to political trust as vertical trust and social trust as horizontal trust. The main focus in this chapter will be on understanding vertical trust, and I note that there has been much more research on the psychological processes underlying horizontal trust (see, e.g., Richell et al., 2005; Said, Baron, & Todorov, 2009; Spezio et al., 2008). I will further argue that with the necessary caveats (see, e.g., Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Hetherington, 1999), insights gained from the study of horizontal trust can be used to understand vertical trust.

Here I assume that the basic psychological mechanisms underlying vertical and horizontal trust overlap to a certain extent. I also point out that there are important differences between vertical and horizontal trust. In particular,

vertical trust exists in hierarchical settings in which important power differences exist (Lind, 1995; see also Murray & Lamarche, this volume). Furthermore, it involves trust in abstract entities and organizations (Van den Bos, 2011). Nevertheless, I will argue here that because direct information about trust in institutions is often missing (Van den Bos, Van Schie, & Colenberg, 2002; Van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998), political or vertical trust is often personalized: When forming judgments of political or vertical trust, people frequently zoom in on trust in persons representing social institutions. In particular, how fairly individuals such as civil servants, politicians, judges, or scientists act serves as an important indication whether the institution the person represents can be trusted or not (Van den Bos, 2011, 2018; see also Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

Social Institutions

Social institutions, their genesis, and their functioning are principal objects of study in the social and behavioral sciences (Durkheim, 1895). As with trust, there are many definitions of social institutions. Different definitions of institutions emphasize varying levels of formality and organizational complexity (Calvert, 1995; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). In this chapter on the social psychology of social institutions, I focus on institutions as mechanisms that govern the behavior of people within a given community or society, with the purpose of giving direction to important rules that direct or are supposed to direct people's behaviors. I note that institutions often tend to involve integrated systems of rules that structure social interactions (Hodgson, 2015). Social institutions can also consist of stable, valued, recurring patterns of behavior (Huntington, 1996). Thus, how I use the term "institutions" most of the time applies to formal institutions created by law as well as custom and that have a distinctive permanence in ordering social behaviors. When talking about "institutions," I also refer to informal institutions such as customs or behavior patterns important to a society.[1]

One type of trust in institutions concerns trust in government. Government as an institution can be defined as the machinery that is set up by the state to administer its functions and duties. The function of the government as an institution, thus defined, is to keep the state-organized, run its affairs, and administer its various functions and duties. Viewed in this manner, a government is an institution through which leaders exercise power to make and enforce laws. A government's basic functions are to provide leadership, maintain order, provide public services, provide national security, provide economic security, and provide economic assistance.[2] As we shall see, both personal and informational uncertainty play an important role in people's trust in government (Van den Bos, 2011).

Another important concern has to do with trust in the law (Tyler & Huo, 2002; Van den Bos, 2021). The law as a system can be defined as a codified set of

rules developed to regulate interactions and exchanges among people (Tyler & Jost, 2007). As such, the law constitutes an arrangement of rules and guidelines that are created and enforced through social and governmental institutions to regulate behavior. This regulation of behavior includes conflict resolution and sentencing decisions, and ideally takes place in such a way that a community shows respect to its members (Robertson, 2013). Personal uncertainty certainly plays an important role in how people experience court hearings, but the role of informational uncertainty is especially important in the evaluation of many legal issues and people's trust in law, so I argue. After all, many lay citizens do not have access to formal jurisprudence or have a hard time interpreting earlier legal rulings and verdicts (Van den Bos, 2021). As a consequence, so I propose, people's judgments of trust in law are often formed under conditions of informational uncertainty.

A final issue that I would like to examine here is trust in science. Science has important characteristics of an institution, as it can be "regarded as a body of rules and related objects which exist prior to and independently of a given person and which exercise a constraining influence upon the person's behavior" (Hartung, 1951, p. 35). Science constitutes an important domain of human life, in part because it involves reliability of insight on which we want to build our lives. Science also involves the trustworthiness of scientists and the integrity of research findings (see also Jussim et al., this volume). Thus, I argue that when trust in science is shaken, this increases levels of personal uncertainty. Furthermore, when scientific findings are difficult to understand or not accessible because they are put behind paywalls, people form their judgments of trust in science under important conditions of informational uncertainty. This also includes trust in scientific organizations and persons representing those organizations, such as organizations and scientists that try to manage certain crises (such as the COVID-19 crisis) while they are still learning about the causes of the crises under consideration. In what follows, I examine some implications of these introductory notes on trust and social institutions.

Informational and Personal Uncertainty

It is important to examine briefly what the concept of uncertainty entails. In doing so, I rely on earlier conceptual discussions of this issue, in particular Forgas (this volume) and Van den Bos (2009) and Van den Bos and Lind (2002; see also Van den Bos, 2001, 2004; Van den Bos & Lind, 2009; Van den Bos & Loseman, 2011, and Van den Bos, McGregor, & Martin, 2015).

There are many different types of uncertainties that people can encounter, and it is important not to confuse them (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002, 2009). In our work, my colleagues and I have focused on two important varieties (Van den Bos, 2009). One noteworthy type of uncertainty that people often face when forming social judgments is informational uncertainty, which involves

having less information available than one ideally would like to have in order to be able to confidently form a given social judgment. For example, work on human decision-making reveals that human judgments are often formed under conditions of incomplete information and that these conditions can lead to predictable effects on human decision and social judgment processes (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). Thus, when studying how people make social judgments, a pivotal issue is what information people have available.

Informational uncertainty is important and may be what psychologists come up most frequently when they think of the concept of uncertainty, partly because of the success of the decision-making literature and the well-known work of Nobel laureates such as Kahneman and Phelps (e.g., Kahneman et al., 1982; Phelps, 1970). However, I argue that while informational uncertainty is important, we should not confuse the concept with personal uncertainty. Personal uncertainty is another type of uncertainty and is important to understand self-regulation, existential sense-making, and worldview defense. I define personal uncertainty as a subjective sense of doubt or instability in self-views, worldviews, or the interrelation between the two (Arkin, Oleson, & Carroll, 2009). Furthermore, personal uncertainty, as I conceive of it, involves the implicit and explicit feelings and other subjective reactions people experience as a result of being uncertain about themselves (Van den Bos, 2001, 2007; Van den Bos, Poortvliet, Maas, Miedema, & Van den Ham, 2005). In short, personal uncertainty is the feeling that you experience when you feel uncertain about yourself, and I argue that typically experiencing personal uncertainty constitutes an aversive or at least an uncomfortable feeling (Hogg, 2007; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002; see also Hogg & Gaffney, this volume).

The difference between informational and personal uncertainty is related to the distinction that has been drawn between epistemic and affective dimensions of uncertainty. In other words, *knowing* that you are uncertain about something is different from *feeling* uncertain (Hogg, 2007). Personal uncertainty entails both stable individual differences, such as differences in emotional uncertainty (Greco & Roger, 2001; Sedikides, De Cremer, Hart, & Brebels, 2009), and situational fluctuations, such as conditions in which people's personal uncertainties have (versus have not) been made salient (Van den Bos, 2001). After all, personal uncertainty can be produced by contextual factors that challenge people's certainty about their cognitions, perceptions, feelings, behaviors, and ultimately, their certainty about and confidence in their sense of self (Hogg, 2001). This self-certainty is very important because the self-concept is the critical organizing principle, referent point, or integrative framework for diverse perceptions, feelings, and behaviors (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; see also Loseman, Miedema, Van den Bos, & Vermunt, 2009). The locus of uncertainty can be found in many aspects of the social context, and therefore we are all susceptible to personal uncertainty. However, biographical factors also create stable individual differences in levels of uncertainty, and they can impact people's

approaches to how they manage uncertainty (Sorrentino, Hodson, & Huber, 2001; Sorrentino, Short, & Raynor, 1984). Furthermore, people strive more strongly, of course, for certainty about those aspects of life that are important to them (Hogg & Mullin, 1999; see also Hogg & Gaffney, this volume).

Informational Uncertainty and Trust in Institutions

A key question that people often struggle with concerns the issue of whether other people or institutions with which they are involved are to be trusted (Van den Bos, 2011). Lind (1995) has characterized this as the fundamental social dilemma: Can I trust others, and especially societal authorities and institutions (Tyler & Lind, 1992), not to exploit or exclude me from important relationships or social connections (see also Hirschberger; Mikulincer & Shaver; and Murray & Lamarche, this volume)? Furthermore, people's trust in social institutions, including government, law, and science, has an important bearing on the legitimacy of these institutions. But quite often, direct information about this issue is lacking as well (Van den Bos, 2011).

Trust is thus related to an important building block of our society, a foundation on which our society rests. And being able to trust others and institutions is very important for people. However, contrary to what is assumed in the literature on trust and trustworthiness (Brewer, 2008; Damasio, 2005; Giffin, 1967; Güth, Ockenfels, & Wendel, 1997; Kramer, 2001), people often lack the information they need to decide whether others (including abstract entities such as institutions) can be trusted and regarded as reliable interaction partners (Van den Bos, 2000; Van den Bos et al., 1998). It is indeed often difficult to determine whether you really can trust another party. You need, for example, a lot of experience with the other party before you can reach such a decision with certainty, and in general, we do not have such information. Under such circumstances, when you have less information than you would like to have about the other party's trustworthiness, you will have to make do with the information you do have at your disposition. This often concerns fairness: people can often form a good impression of how fairly they are being treated based on relatively little information (Lind, 1995). The impressions gained from some encounters are often enough to allow people to decide whether they are being treated fairly and in a just manner by the other party.

People thus often use information about how fairly or unfairly they are treated by persons representing social institutions as a proxy for the lacking information on the institution's trustworthiness (Van den Bos, 2011; Van den Bos et al., 1998). If the representative behaves fairly, this is viewed as an important indication that the institution is legitimate and can be trusted. And if a person representing the social institution acts in clearly unfair ways, then important doubts about the legitimacy and trustworthiness of the institution will remain or arise. Perceived fairness is thus important as a substitute for

institutional legitimacy (Van den Bos, 2011) and because it gives people information about the extent to which they can trust other people, the government, law, science, and other institutions (Van den Bos et al., 2002).

Personal Uncertainty and Trust in Institutions

Apart from informational uncertainty, personal uncertainty is one of the other main reasons why fairness is important to people (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002, 2009, 2011). People often feel uncertain and insecure in their dealings with authorities and institutions, for example, because these agencies can exert power or influence over them (Tyler & Huo, 2002) and may even exploit them or cut off social links that are important to them, excluding them from society as a whole or important groups within society (Tyler & DeGoey, 1996; see also Mikulincer & Shaver, this volume). Furthermore, people in modern society often have experiences that make them feel unsure of themselves. This feeling of personal uncertainty is experienced by people as unpleasant (Hogg, 2007), often as very unpleasant (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002, 2009). In fact, personal uncertainty is often seen as an alarm signal ("What's going on here?"; "I'll have to watch out in this situation: it doesn't feel good"; Van den Bos, Ham, Lind, Simonis, Van Essen & Rijpkema, 2008; see also Mikulincer & Shaver, and Von Hippel & Merakovsky, this volume).

Stable individual differences exist in the extent to which people experience personal insecurity as emotionally threatening (Greco & Roger, 2001; Van den Bos, Euwema, Poortvliet & Maas, 2007). In fact, some people regard uncertainty as an enjoyable challenge rather than a threat (Sorrentino, Bobocel, Gitta, Olson & Hewitt, 1988; see also Fiedler & McCaughey; and Kruglanski & Ellenberg, this volume), although I view this as an exception that generally involves informational uncertainty (Weary & Jacobson, 1997; Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer & Gilbert, 2005) rather than personal uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2001, 2011), and applies especially when people can trust other people in their environments and institutions in their society (see also Mikulincer & Shaver, this volume).

Most people regard personal uncertainty as unpleasant and try to cope with it in some way. A possible coping mechanism is to explore the extent to which one forms part of one's social environment and the society in which one lives, or, in other words, to explore the extent of one's social integration (Hogg & Gaffney, 2022; Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner & Moffitt, 2007; see also Arriaga & Kumashiro, this volume). This makes it important for people to feel that they are accepted and respected by important people or groupings in their environment or in wider society. A key indicator of this acceptance and respect is being fairly and decently treated by important people in society or important individuals in the group to which one belongs (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; see also See, 2009; Thau, Aquino & Wittek, 2007;

Thau, Bennett, Mitchell & Marrs, 2009). In this way, perceived fairness can help people cope with personal uncertainty. It may even turn uncertainty from a threat into an agreeable challenge (Van den Bos & Lind, 2009), perhaps because people associate fair treatment with positive affect (Van den Bos, 2007, 2009, 2011).

The requirement of fairness is an important norm in practically every society and subculture (Van den Bos, Brockner et al., 2010). The precise form of fairness required varies from one culture (Van den Bos, Brockner et al., 2010) or subculture (Doosje, Loseman, & Van den Bos, 2013) to another. For example, some cultures attach greater importance to the fair treatment of all members of the group, while others focus more on the fair treatment of individuals (Brockner, De Cremer, Van den Bos & Chen, 2005; see also Hofstede, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai & Lucca, 1988). With this proviso, fair, decent treatment appears to be an important norm and cultural value in practically any culture or subculture (Lind, Tyler, & Huo, 1997). A main reason why this is the case is because being treated fairly and justly by important members of your group or society, such as representatives of your society's institutions, indicates that you are viewed as an important member of your group and society (Lind & Tyler, 1988). In short, group values are important in perceiving treatment fairness and how you respond to social institutions.

I further assume that situations in which people are interacting and coordinating their behaviors with others play a major role in processes that people go through when forming judgments of trust in social institutions (Van den Bos, 2018). People's social values are important in this respect. Findings suggest that most (but certainly not all) humans tend to be oriented toward cooperation. Indeed, in many studies, a small majority of 60–70% of participants tend to adhere to cooperative value orientations and as such can be characterized as prosocial beings (Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997; Van den Bos et al., 2011). Ironically, the social quality of people may inhibit them from showing their prosociality, especially when they are busy trying to sort out what is going on, how to behave in the situation at hand, and how others will view their behaviors. Having made sense of how to interpret the situation at hand and what constitutes appropriate behavior in the situation may help people to free themselves and engage in prosocial behaviors, including putting trust in other people, such as persons representing social institutions that have power over them and play an important role in the societies in which people live. However, overcoming inhibitory constraints can be difficult, which constitutes an important reason why the prosocial or trusting qualities of people may not always show in public circumstances (Van den Bos & Lind, 2013; Van den Bos et al., 2011; Van den Bos, Müller, & Van Bussel, 2009). Furthermore, when people are very uncertain about themselves, their cooperative intentions can easily come under pressure (Van den Bos, 2018). It is often the combination

of personal and informational uncertainty that will have the strongest impact on people's reactions (Van den Bos, 2011, 2018).

A Warning Note on Distrust, Weird Studies, and the Internet

It is important to emphasize that low levels of trust or the absence of trust are not the same as outright distrust in institutions such as government, law, and science. Furthermore, judgments of trust and distrust in institutions are not made in a vacuum. Instead, they are formed under conditions that change in dynamic ways over time (Jansma, Van den Bos, & De Graaf, 2022). An important issue that I want to note here is how high distrust in our social institutions has grown over the years, how social psychology and the behavioral sciences may miss this development, and how easily distrust is exacerbated on the Internet.

I indeed think we should not be naive about the growing and sometimes hidden levels of unwarranted distrust in institutions that aim, or should aim, to hold our society together. An important reason why distrust in institutions may occur is that many modern institutions, parts of these institutions, or people affiliated with these institutions do not function as well as they should. For example, in many countries, government agencies are now run with much attention given to issues of process management but with decreasing expertise in the areas of content, they are supposed to govern. Furthermore, judges sometimes have a hard time dealing with modern citizens, who demand and expect to be involved much more actively and intensively during the handling of their cases in court. Moreover, some individual scientists clearly failed to live up to the high levels of scientific quality and research integrity that society expected them to adhere to.[3] These observations can be good and valid reasons why trust in important institutions that aim, or should aim, to hold societies together is waning or may even turn into judgments of distrust in these institutions. It is important, indeed crucial, to remain critical about the current state of social institutions such as government, law, and science. It would be wrong to take any form of distrust in these and other institutions to be inaccurate and misguided.

Informational uncertainty about the workings of institutions, when combined with high levels of personal uncertainty regarding one's role in society, can lead to growing levels of distrust (Van den Bos, 2011). It seems clear that distrust leads to resentment, anger, complaints (from citizens who are capable of looking after themselves; Van den Bos, 2007), aggressive behavior (from citizens who need help looking after themselves; Van den Bos, 2007), and individual or collective protest (Klandermans, 1997). Furthermore, distrust leads to activation of the amygdala (Van den Bos, 2011), which is probably related to feelings of fear elicited by distrust (for example, triggered by the sight of faces

that one distrusts). Oxytocin deactivates the amygdala, thus reducing distrust (Kirsch et al., 2005; see also Richell et al., 2005).

De Gruijter, Smits van Waesberghe, and Boutellier (2010) studied the dissatisfaction of citizens of Dutch extraction with new immigrants and with government policy on this point. The idea of "active citizenship," as propagated by the Dutch government, implies that citizens are actively involved in society and that they can cope with social differences. The results achieved in practice are different, however, as the study by De Gruiter and colleagues shows. People who live in mixed neighborhoods see the government as mainly to blame for all their problems. An important finding of the study was the perception of local residents that the government was very distant from their concerns. The respondents regarded government officials, figures of authority, and politicians as privileged people who had no idea how the common man or woman lives and no feeling for the real economic and social problems of citizens. This can easily lead to misunderstandings and poor communication, especially when doubt exists as to how things are arranged in modern society (Boutellier, 2010).

The differences between citizens with high and low educational levels appear to play an important role here (Bovens & Wille, 2017). Educational degrees divide many societies nowadays. There are marked differences between the extents to which people with high and low educational levels trust politics and the constitutional state. Dissatisfaction and cynicism about profiteers and social climbers are found mainly among white people with low educational levels, who feel neglected by the upper classes (Bovens & Wille, 2017; De Gruijter et al., 2010). Furthermore, Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) comment that young people trust society less than older people.

Some scholars propagate the idea that distrust can fulfill a constructive function and that reasonable, well-organized distrust of those elites is to be applauded (Hobbes, 1651). Inquiring whether matters are properly arranged and whether the government, law, and science are to be completely trusted at all times is indeed part of the democratic scrutiny that may be expected of citizens. Nevertheless, too much distrust in government, law, or science is often undesirable, both at a social level (see, e.g., Ely, 1980; Warren, 1999) and at a psychological level (see, e.g., Kramer, 1994; Kramer & Cook, 2004).

I believe that we should not enthusiastically embrace simplified notions about the constructive value of distrust. I am particularly skeptical about the extent to which such conflict models (see also Dahrendorf, 1959) actually describe the real behavior of citizens, and I suspect that they may naively overestimate the positive role conflict can play in society and interpersonal relationships (see also Etzioni, 2004).

Another issue that deserves attention is that social psychology needs to broaden its scope of attention in order not to miss the possible growth of distrust in institutions. For example, many studies in social psychology, and indeed in

the behavioral sciences more generally, rely too strongly on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) participants (Henrich, 2020; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010a, 2010b). In fact, social psychological findings may be missing crucial patterns because WEIRD participants are tested by WEIRD interviewers. For example, Van den Bos et al. (in press) show that when answering questionnaires on trust in judges that were given to them by interviewers from law schools or psychology departments, lower-educated people indicated that they hold high levels of trust. That pattern replicates many known findings. Yet, when the same interviewers presented themselves as coming from lower-educated backgrounds, participants' responses changed such that they reported much lower levels of trust. These findings suggest that experimentally varying the "WEIRD-ness" of interviewers may help to detect deeply held but rarely expressed feelings about mainstream institutions.

Finally, I would like to argue that we should not be naive about the Internet as an important moderator of unwarranted distrust in institutions. Already in 1999, this issue was discussed in a now-famous interview of David Bowie by Jeremy Paxman on BBC Newsnight. Bowie, an Internet pioneer, talked about the fragmentation of society that he saw beginning in the 1970s and correctly predicted that the Internet would further fragment things away from a world where there were "known truths and known lies" toward a world where there are "two, three, four sides to every question," something that would be simultaneously "exhilarating and terrifying" and would "crush our ideas of what mediums are all about."[4] Indeed, the Internet and so-called "social media" can easily lead people to start adopting exaggerated levels of distrust in social institutions, letting go of self-control, inflaming emotional responses, and starting to sympathize with attempts to break the law in order to reach their goals (Van den Bos, 2018; Van den Bos et al., 2021).

An Encouraging Note on Legitimacy and Perceived Fairness

I want to close with some encouraging words. In this chapter, I proposed that trust in these social institutions may be decreasing because many people experience personal uncertainties, which constitute an alarming experience to most people, leading to lower levels of trust in institutions that have power over them. The provision of good, reliable, and accessible information about how institutions actually work can lead to calmer responses and higher levels of trust in institutions. This is not an easy process that always works, for one thing, because there tends to be a lot of informational uncertainty about how social institutions operate and function. Furthermore, whether institutions have legitimacy is often difficult to ascertain with certainty. From the literature on perceived treatment fairness follows that in circumstances in which personal and informational uncertainty are high, people tend to rely on the perceived fairness of persons representing social institutions (Van den Bos, 2005, 2011,

2015; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002, 2009; Van den Bos et al., 1998, 2002). This means that the individual civil servant, politician, judge, lawyer, and scientific researcher and teacher have important responsibilities: When they act in ways that are truly fair and honest, giving people opportunities to voice their opinions at appropriate times, carefully listening to these opinions, and thus treating people with respect as full-fledged citizens of their society, this can increase trust in institutions and prevent unwarranted levels of distrust (Van den Bos, Van der Velden, & Lind, 2014). I hope that the social psychology of informational and personal uncertainty, combined with the associated literature on perceived fairness, may help to firmly build or rebuild warranted trust in social institutions.

Notes

1 For more information, see, for example, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institution.
2 See, for instance, https://philosophy-question.com/library/lecture/read/352409-what-is-government-as-institution.
3 See, for instance, https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/nl/over/gedrag-integriteit/commissie-levelt.
4 See, for example, https://tidbits.com/2020/11/01/david-bowies-1999-insights-into-the-internet/, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-35286749, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jan/11/david-bowie-bowienet-isp-internet.

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