

TRUST AS AN ASPECT OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING: A STUDY IN FOUR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Trust is one of the essential themata generating social representations and therefore, this study was designed to investigate the importance and meaning of trust as an attribute of well-being of the individual and of society. This article is based on study of trust in four different political-cultural contexts: in the Czech Republic, Russia, Scotland, and Slovakia. Results indicate that the three post-communist countries rate trust as more important for the well-being of the individual than for that of society. In addition, the meaning of trust in the four nations shows some differences. Scots anchor the concept of trust in personal commitments and in personal involvement, in the principles of democracy and civic cooperation. In contrast, we found that for our participants in the three post-communistic countries trust is more related to positive interpersonal relationships and to characteristics of “other” people. Moreover, like in Scotland, democratic principles constitute a basic framework within which trust is conceived. However, in the three post-communist countries, self-responsibility and one’s own personal activity seems to be of lower importance with respect to the meaning of trust.

1. Introduction

The concept of trust is essential to humanity and therefore, it underlies many contexts and domains of individual and social life. The basic sense of trust establishes the ground for mutuality during early childhood (Erikson, 1963). The knowledge-based trust (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994), as a product of socialisation and conscious experience, is related to particular social objects like individuals and institutions. Trust enables anticipations in interpersonal interactions and establishing commitments, it leads to feelings of confidence, sharing and intimacy. It expresses beliefs in the persistence and fulfilment of natural orders and moral rules and norms (Barber, 1983). Different forms of trust can be related to such basic attributes of the stable social world like predictability, reliability, and legibility (Misztral, 1996).

Like social recognition (Marková et al., 1998), one can argue that trust is a basic dialogical thema generating social representations. One could say that it is a basic precondition for communication, for expectation that one is acknowledged as a dialogical partner and that one is prepared to acknowledge the other as such. Trust is a belief in social recognition. Trust and social recognition thus go together; the former as expectation of social recognition and the latter as a realisation of trust. While trust is a basic pre-condition for communication, with the development of individualism in the 16th century it became problematised and thematised and it became part of the public discourse (Seligman, 1997; Luhman, 1988). We can hypothesize that it started generating social representations of democracy, responsibility, the individual and community.

During the last decade or so, 'trust' and 'distrust' have become frequently used terms in the social, economic and political sciences both in the traditional democracies and in the countries of post-communist Europe. They appear in the titles of numerous books and journal articles, and they are frequent themes at scientific meetings as well as in the public debates.

The social sciences and humanities have been warning in the recent years of the growing individualist tendencies within the traditional democracies. They have emphasised the increasing mania of claims for more and more rights for individuals and for specific groups mutually fighting one another (for example, rights of the mother versus rights of the

unborn baby), and of expanding and multiplying rights at the expense of responsibilities. They view consequences of these tendencies in the decline of trust and sociability, in the rise of violent crime and of civil litigation and in a general collapse of shared and communal values. They argue that the present society has drained itself of trust, which in turn poses problems for democracy. Questions are being raised as to how, today, individuals, and in particular young people, can be re-educated for justified and informed trust. In particular, the question we pose in our research, concerns the ways trust and distrust generate social representations of democracy.

If we consider the situation in the post-communist countries of Europe, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 originally opened up a high level of optimism for the concerned countries regarding their transformation towards democracy. This optimism involved all spheres of life ranging from political to personal. Among these, one of the important issues was how to re-establish respect for the individual and for communities, which was drastically reduced or totally wiped out during totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism. Nevertheless, even if totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism in Europe disappeared as political regimes, their consequences in people's minds last much longer. In some ways, individuals' characters may remain deformed for the rest of their lives. During those regimes it did not matter whether you were honest or dishonest, moral or immoral (Moscovici, 1997). Social identities are largely formed by our social recognition by others, as well as by its absence – that is, by being treated as if are human beings as well as by being treated as if we were not human beings. As those regimes made arbitrary decisions concerning human matters and therefore, they could not be trusted, they degrade individuals as individuals.

Original optimism in the post-communist countries, which existed after 1989, unfortunately, has not been upheld. Today, distrust of institutions, again, seems to dominate social thinking. Of course, there are considerable differences between post-communist countries, with optimism and pessimism fluctuating as economic and political changes take place.

Thus the problem of how to re-establish trust in society seems to be a matter of concern, both for the traditional and for the newly established democracies.

Trust is a polysemic and a heterogeneous concept. It has different meanings in different languages, in different socio-economic groups and in different socio-political systems. While we always seem to know what we mean by distrust, in contrast, trust, both as a phenomenon and as a word, belongs to the issues which remain unnoticed if their existence is apparent. Trust enters into discussion when it is threatened, or at least when there is something in question about it, or when it no longer exists.

2. The present study

The reported study is part of an international project on language and social representations of responsibilities and entitlements carried out in Scotland, France, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Russia.¹ This study was based on an extensive questionnaire and on discussions by focus groups, exploring various aspects of representations of responsibilities and entitlements. In addition, we examined meanings of other social and economic terms, one of them being trust. Data reported in this paper are based on examining well-being of the individual and of society in four European countries: the Czech Republic, Russia, Scotland and Slovakia. The aim of the present article study is answer the following three questions:

- (1) Is trust perceived as important for well-being of the individual and of society?
- (2) With what social, political and economic terms is trust semantically associated?
- (3) Is trust part of the same semantic cluster in evaluation of the well-being of the individual and the well-being of society?

3. Method

3. 1. Participants

The total sample includes 781 respondents of four countries: 200 Czechs, 198 Russians, 196 Scots, and 200 Slovaks. All national samples were selected from two age-groups, 16-18 and 19-21 years old, 50% of males and 50% of females in each sample.

3. 2. Measures

Trust was one of 34 terms, which were evaluated with respect to well-being of the individual and of society. Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of these terms on two 6-point scales (individual well-being and social well-being). Most of the

selected terms were based on our previous research which was concerned with social representations of democracy and of the individual in post-communist Europe (Moodie, Marková, Farr, & Plichtová, 1997; Marková et al., 1998)

3. 3. Procedure

All statistical procedures were run separately for each of the four national samples. At first, we calculated means of all terms for well-being of the individual and of society. Paired t-tests were used to compare the importance of trust for well-being of the individual and of society in each country. In order to reveal semantic associations of trust with other terms, we factor-analysed the data for 34 terms, separately for each of the two scales (well-being of the individual and of society). A principal component factor analysis with iterations (Varimax rotation) identified factors, which were saturated by the term trust with the loading equal to or greater than .40.

4. Results

4. 1. The importance of trust in the context of well-being.

The results show that the means for trust are among the highest of the 34 terms, both for the individual and social well-being (Table 1 and Table 2). Further analysis of data indicates that the respondents from the three post-communist countries rate trust as more important for the well-being of individual than for well-being of society (all three paired t-tests indicated significant differences between mean scores). For Scots there is no significant difference between these two evaluations.

Table 1: An importance of terms in regard to the well-being of individual

Order	Scotland	M	Slovakia	M	the Czech republic	M	Russia	M
1	Freedom	5.58	Justice	5.85	Freedom	5.76	Freedom	5.45
2	Indiv. rights	5.47	Freedom	5.85	Justice	5.66	Law and order	5.36
3	Equality	5.46	Security	5.82	Security	5.59	Security	5.35
4	Justice	5.42	Human rights	5.76	Human rights	5.59	Human rights	5.34
5	Human rights	5.41	Self-responsibility	5.64	Individual rights	5.50	Certainty	5.31
6	Self-responsibility	5.29	Law and order	5.54	Trust	5.48	Respect to self	5.25
7	Trust	5.23	Certainty	5.49	Certainty	5.45	Justice	5.25
8	Law and order	5.19	Trust	5.48	Law and order	5.40	Trust	5.23
9	Responsibility to others	5.08	Democracy	5.35	Resp self	5.24	Individual rights	5.11
10	Security	5.04	Morality	5.33	Equality	5.02	Self-interest	5.09

Table 2: An importance of terms in regard to the well-being of society

Order	Scotland	M	Slovakia	the Czech republic	M	Russia	M	
1	Justice	5.48	Law and order	5.68	Freedom	5.52	Law and order	5.56
2	Human rights	5.39	Justice	5.66	Security	5.51	Security	5.27
3	Law and order	5.37	Human rights	5.62	Human rights	5.48	Justice	5.22
4	Freedom	5.35	Freedom	5.58	Justice	5.46	Human rights	5.15
5	Equality	5.22	Security	5.57	Law and order	5.42	Legal responsibility	5.12
6	Trust	5.13	Cooperation	5.38	Trust	5.36	Society	5.08
7	Legal responsibility	5.04	Democracy	5.34	Cooperation	5.26	Freedom	5.05
8	Local community	5.01	Trust	5.29	Individual rights	5.19	Cooperation	5.02
9	Democracy	5.01	Morality	5.27	Morality	5.18	Trust	4.97
10	Cooperation	4.99	Legal responsibility	5.25	Certainty	5.14	Commitment	4.91

Compared to other countries, the Scottish sample includes more respondents, who rate trust as rather neutral. The ratings of the Russian sample show a number of people, who consider that trust as not a very important attribute of well-being.

4. 2. Semantic associations of trust

In order to examine semantic associations of trust, factor analyses were run separately for each of the two scales. As we were primarily concerned with these associations, we did not interpret all extracted factors. We observed only those, which were significantly saturated by the variable of trust (Tables 3 and 4 on next page).

The answer to the third question, as to whether trust is part of the same semantic cluster for the individual and social well-being, was given on the basis of the visual inspection of all the above clusters (factors). These results may indirectly contribute toward better understanding of mutual relationships between personal and social representations of the concept of trust.

For Scots, the cluster, expressing the well-being of the individual, contains terms representing the traditional 'social recognition terms' (justice, freedom, human rights, individual rights, self-respect, equality, law and order) (Markova et al., 1998). It also includes three terms, which are part of the cluster for well-being of the society (morality, security, commitment). The cluster expressing the well-being of society includes, in addition, terms which refer to co-operation and public interest.

Table 3: The well-being of individual: Factors including the trust

Scotland	loading	Slovakia	loading	the Czech republic	loading	Russia	loading
Justice	0.72	Human rights	0.81	Trust	0.68	Morality	0.69
Freedom	0.72	Law and order	0.52	Certainty	0.67	Solidarity	0.64
Trust	0.69	Trust	0.41	Equality	0.62	Social cohesion	0.63
Self-responsibility	0.69			Society	0.51	Trust	0.62
Human rights	0.63					Tradition	0.61
Security	0.63					Responsibility to others	0.60
Individual rights	0.60					Legal responsibility	0.48
Commitment	0.60					Justice	0.46
Equality	0.60					Self interest	0.40
Law and order	0.58						
Morality	0.54						
<i>Variance</i>	16.2		5.6		6.7		10.6

Table 4: The well-being of society: Factors including the trust.

Scotland	loading	Slovakia	loading	the Czech republic	loading	loading	Russia	loading
Local community	0.72	Morality	0.70	Freedom	0.73		Political parties	0.70
Trust	0.64	Cooperation	0.70	Tradition	0.64		Opposition	0.61
Public interest	0.62	Solidarity	0.69	Justice	0.62		Privatisation	0.50
Solidarity	0.60	Legal responsibility	0.63	Law and order	0.60		Trust	- 0.41
Certainty	0.59	Trust	0.58	Human rights	0.56			
Morality	0.48	Social cohesion	0.55	Democracy	0.54			
Commitment	0.42			Social cohesion		0.68		
Cooperation	0.43			Equality		0.65		
Security	0.40			Trust	0.40	0.58		
Political parties	0.43			Cooperation		0.57		
				Certainty		0.54		
				Responsibility to others	0.37	0.54		
				Morality	0.40	0.48		
<i>Variance</i>	11.2		9.7		10.2	10.0		5.9

For Slovaks, there is no overlap between the two clusters. The cluster for well-being of the individual includes two of the ‘social recognition terms’ (human rights, law and order) while the cluster expressing well-being of society includes co-operation terms. For Czechs, the individual-well being cluster does not refer to social recognition. However, in contrast, the social well-being cluster splits into the ‘social recognition’ (freedom, justice, law and order, human rights, democracy) and into co-operation cluster (social cohesion,

cooperation, respect for others, morality). For Russians, the cluster for individual well-being includes one social recognition term (justice) and a mixture of morality and responsibility terms. Trust for social well-being is not related positively to any terms but negatively to political parties, opposition and privatisation.

5. Discussion

The results of the present study reflect on several issues, which will require further theoretical and empirical consideration.

First, trust has semantic variations in different languages, is based on different etymologies and socio-cultural histories. For example, the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology maintains that the noun trust was used in the 13th century to mean confidence; and in the 15th century to mean reliability and fidelity. In the 17th century it was used to indicate the commitment to a thing or to a person and it was used as a short for the 'trust company'. It seems that the word came to English from Danish and Swedish where a similar word referred to help, support, confidence, truth, comfort, and so on.

Czech dictionaries refer to the 16th century word 'dovera' with references mainly religious, like trust in God. Examples are taken from the Bible, like, 'who does not trust me fully, he does not love me'. In today's Czech dictionary, trust refers to belief in someone, looking into the future. Moreover, trust is viewed as something naive, childish or women-like. It has emotional connotations, like the trust of passionate friendship and optimism. Also however, Czech proverbs say that too much trust is not good for you because it is too risky. Currently, both in ordinary language and in the social science the word 'trust' is polysemic. It is often used to substitute words like faith, belief, familiarity, confidence, certainty, truth, expectancy, reliability, co-operation, lack of suspicion, and so on. In addition, just like with many social scientific concepts, we can find an endless number of definitions, in particular in sociology and in politics.

Second, our results may reflect socio-political differences in the studied nations. This should not be surprising because what characterized trust/distrust in the communist countries was a deep division of trust and distrust in the private and the public spheres. The private, i.e. the familial and the friend-based sphere, was characterized by trust and cooperation and in general, it remained high. However, as the general policy was to destroy

trust at an interpersonal level, in families, in local communities and among friends, even in this private sphere one needed to be selective and careful with respect to whom to trust. In contrast, the public sphere, the public and institutions and media, were not only distrusted but they also evoked fear. Therefore, one can hardly understand, today, the meaning of trust/distrust if one ignores the emotional component of trust/distrust.

Our results in Scots seem to reflect etymology of trust in the English dictionary. They also follow logic of the long history of democracy in Scotland. We can see, that the preference for trust regarding the well-being of an individual is positively related to the preference for basic democratic attributes as well as to the preference of autonomous personal characteristics. Correspondingly, the cluster of terms surrounding trust in regard to societal well-being includes the importance of civic principles and interest of people in the local life environment. In other words: according to Scots, trust is rooted in basic democratic conditions of society, it also assumes personal moral standards and active self-involvement. As our results show, the Czech concept of trust is semantically near to the concepts of certainty and equality. It leads to an idea, that trust in the context of the individual well-being is based on feelings of similarity to others. If a Czech sees others to be "on the same boat as myself", he/she can trust them. Similarly, the meaning of trust in social context represents the positive interpersonal relationships and an emphasis on the affinity and equality with other people.

In comparison to other nations, Slovaks' concept of trust has less specific meaning. The importance of trust in the context of individual well-being is related to the importance of the law and order and also to the importance of the human rights. Thus, the meaning of trust is not related to the individual activity or to interpersonal relationships but is more connected with general attributes of a fair and just society. Societal context connects trust with morality, co-operation, solidarity, legal responsibility, and social cohesion. This picture of trust is strongly influenced by mutual proximity of people. Nevertheless, norms and objective rules are also important.

Concerning Russians, their concept of trust is more anchored in external characteristics (in comparison to other nations). Trust in the context of individual well-being is related to responsibility of society and to responsibility of other people. Semantic associations of trust in the context of social well-being signal problems in disbelief about democratisation of

society. The importance of trust is negatively related to the importance of political pluralism and economical changes.

Bearing in mind the polysemic nature of trust, it should not be surprising that the meaning of trust would be different in social representations of different phenomena. For example, distrust in the media associated with fear in totalitarian regimes will be a different kind of distrust than that in traditional democracies, where distrust to the media is based above all on attribution of sensationalism, money orientation and bribe.

Our study has shown that trust is embedded in different concepts in different languages. This finding has implications for the study of social representations of phenomena like democracy, responsibility or, totalitarianism. Embeddedness of trust in the network of other concepts determines the manner in which trust is thematised and consequently, to what phenomena it is anchored and objectified.

Note:

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