

Review

Suspicion of institutions: How distrust and conspiracy theories deteriorate social relationships

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Abstract

Many citizens distrust powerful societal institutions, and hold conspiracy theories about them. What are the implications of this suspicion of institutions for people's social relationships? The current paper proposes that institutions have at least two functions to regulate citizens' social relationships: providing people with a sense of safety, and providing models for group norms and values. Suspicion of institutions undermines both of these functions, and therefore yields a range of negative societal outcomes by impacting people's interpersonal, within-group, and between-group relationships. More specifically, suspicion of institutions reduces trust between strangers, within-group cooperation, commitment, and prosocial behavior, and increases prejudice, intergroup conflict, polarization, and extremism. We conclude that institutional distrust and conspiracy theories erode the fabric of society.

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Keywords

Institutions, Distrust, Conspiracy theories, Social relationships.

Modern democratic societies have a range of powerful institutions in place, such as a government, companies, a legal system, tax authorities, and so on. These institutions are designed to organize society, stimulate cooperation toward collective goals, and regulate human behavior. However, institutional trust has been low

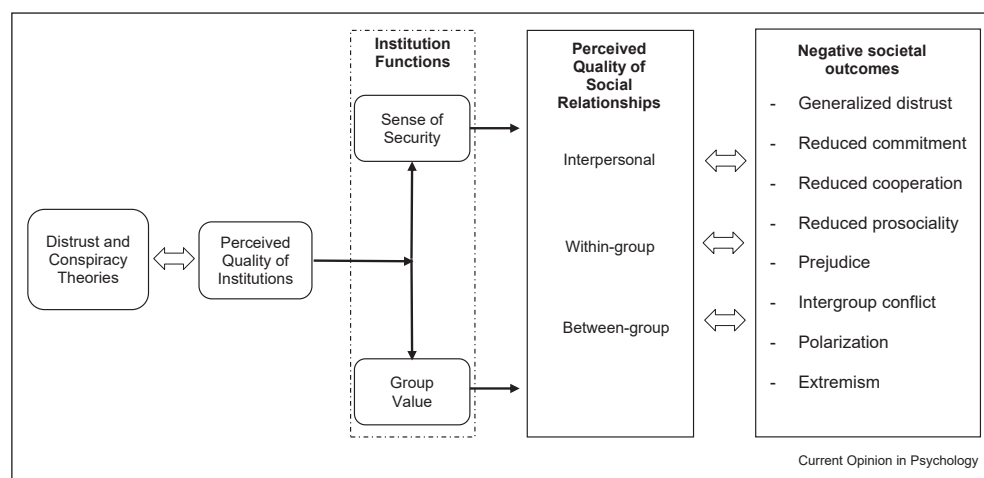
throughout the years across countries (see the Edelman Trust Barometer over the past 20 years at <https://www.edelman.com/trust>). Furthermore, many citizens believe conspiracy theories that for instance accuse institutions of using the COVID-19 pandemic to suppress citizens, exaggerating the perils of climate change, rigging elections, and so on [1–3]. Although endorsement of institutional distrust and conspiracy theories may appear to go hand in hand, these two concepts are distinct. Distrust refers to a global feeling that one prefers to avoid a vulnerable position toward powerful institutions due to negative expectations, whereas conspiracy theories refer to concrete beliefs that institutions, or individual actors associated with them, collude in secret to pursue malevolent goals. Institutional distrust and conspiracy beliefs are substantially interrelated, however [4–6], and converge in a psychological rejection of societal institutions. How does such suspicion of institutions shape people's social relationships?

The present contribution proposes that when people perceive societal institutions to be of low quality, it also deteriorates the quality of their social relationships. Specifically, well-functioning institutions regulate citizens' social relationships at the interpersonal, within-group, and between-group levels in at least two ways: (1) by providing a sense of security and (2) by providing models for group norms and values. Suspicion of institutions undermines these functions, which yields a range of negative societal outcomes in a myriad of ways. [Figure 1](#) illuminates how institutions regulate social relationships, and how distrust and conspiracy theories yield a range of negative societal outcomes through these processes. In the following, we describe our line of reasoning in more detail.

Institutions and security

One core function of governmental and legal institutions is to protect citizens from harm. For instance, through a rule of law and centralized punishment of transgressions, societal institutions discourage cheating in interpersonal exchanges [7,8]. Moreover, high-quality institutions in modern societies mitigate some of the negative consequences of personal loss experiences (e.g., unemployment, health problems). As such, institutions are designed to increase a sense of safety among citizens, which facilitates many social and

Figure 1



How the perceived quality of institutions shapes the perceived quality of social relationships.

economic activities such as trade, services, caretaking, and philanthropy. If people are suspicious of institutions, however, they feel less protected by them, which holds implications for how they feel and act in their social relationships.

Institutional distrust strips away a basic sense that one is protected from exploitation, thus reducing trust between strangers, which is at the core of functioning societies. At the societal level, institutional trust and interpersonal trust are strongly related [9–11]. If institutions are perceived as unable—or unwilling—to intervene when others have malevolent intentions, individuals are less willing to risk being taken advantage of [12]. Hence, cues indicating low institutional quality—that institutions cannot be relied upon in times of need—have detrimental effects on interpersonal trust. Indeed, decreased trust in others is associated with perceived unfairness of procedural rules (e.g., democracy [13]), abuse of privilege [14], and widespread corruption [15,16]. When analyzing how trust varies as function of the institutional context, studies on migration show that freedom from corruption in the destination country is the most relevant factor shaping interpersonal trust among immigrants [17].

Conspiracy theories also are associated with reduced interpersonal trust [18]. In various experiments, conspiracy mentality—that is, a trait-like predisposition to perceive secret conspiracies of powerful institutions in the world [19]—predicted reduced investments in a behavioral trust game. This relationship emerged independent of interpersonal cues suggesting actual harmful intentions (i.e., photographs displaying an angry face of the trustee) [20]. Moreover, conspiracy theories also reduce interpersonal trust in another way, as they can be a source of social stigma. Expressing conspiracy theories

promotes people's belief that others will evaluate them negatively, which in turn prompts the expectation to be excluded [21].

A decreased sense of security also has implications for people's relationships with different groups. Feelings of threat prompt a tribal mindset that emphasizes vigilance about possible intergroup harm [22,23], and is at the root of political extremism [24]. Suspicion of institutions hence may be associated with intergroup conflict, and polarization between different ideological groups. For instance, belief in conspiracy theories is associated with prejudice [19,25], international conflict [26], and traits commonly associated with prejudice and intergroup conflict (e.g., authoritarianism [4,27]).

In the United States, political distrust and polarization between Democrats and Republicans are closely associated over time [28]. In the European Union, political distrust predicts an increased likelihood of voting for a populist party that emphasizes intergroup conflict [29,30]. Likewise, political extremism—at both the left and right—is associated with Euroscepticism and political distrust [31], and decreased trust in the legal system [32]. Finally, political extremism is associated with expressions of anger across situations (e.g., Twitter, US congress, news media), which serves to communicate perceived threat by political outgroups [33].

Comparable findings emerge for people's belief in conspiracy theories, which fuels conflict between US liberals versus conservatives [34], is associated with populist attitudes [35,36], and with political extremism at both the left and right [37,38]. Moreover, in the UK general conspiracy theories about institutions predicted Islamophobic conspiracy theories (e.g., beliefs that

there is a Muslim conspiracy to Islamize Europe), which in turn predicted voting to leave the European Union (“Brexit” [39]). As a most extreme manifestation, conspiracy theories are common in the speeches and writings of underground radical groups that commit hate crime or terrorism against other groups [40]. If people do not feel protected by institutions, it negatively reflects in their social relationships at various levels of analysis.

Institutions as models for group norms and values

A second function of institutions is to serve as role models that shape the norms and values of society. For instance, institutions are expected to be impartial and fair decision-makers when settling conflicts of interest pertaining to scarce resources or competing values. People indeed consider institutional authorities to be representative for their community, and therefore a template for group norms [41]. As such, people derive important social identity information from the perceived quality of institutions. If people experience institutional authorities as honest and reliable, they infer to be respected members of a valuable group; but if people experience institutional authorities as dishonest and unreliable, they conclude to be marginalized and powerless members of an unworthy group. The perceived quality of institutions hence is associated with how valuable people experience their group membership, which shapes the quality of social relationships for instance through cooperation, deference to group norms, and commitment [42].

Institutional distrust indeed undermines constructive within-group perceptions and behaviors. For instance, national identification is associated with the trust that citizens have in political institutions in 18 European countries [43], and trust in European institutions contribute to a common identity among EU citizens [44]. Moreover, distrust in political institutions impairs behaviors that benefit the collective, such as political participation (e.g., the likelihood of voting [45]) and cooperation. More specifically, institutional distrust is associated with reduced endorsement of norms of civic cooperation (e.g., deeming antisocial behaviors such as cheating on taxes, or avoiding to pay for public transportation, as acceptable [46]) and low levels of prosocial behavior, operationalized as contributions in economic games [12,47] and donations to charities [48].

Conspiracy theories undermine social relationships in a comparable manner. In organizations conspiracy theories are common (e.g., allegations that managers conspire to benefit themselves at the expense of employees), and these organizational conspiracy theories predict reduced commitment to the organization, reduced job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions [49,50]. Moreover,

conspiracy theories reduce cooperation: experimentally exposing participants to the conspiracy theory that the British government murdered Princess Diana reduced participants’ political engagement (e.g., voting, donating money to political candidates or parties). Exposure to climate change conspiracy theories had similar effects on political engagement, and decreased participants’ willingness to reduce their carbon footprints [51].

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories have also been associated with decreased cooperation, as reflected in hoarding behavior [52] and decreased concern for other people’s safety [53]. More generally, conspiracy theories reduce prosocial behavior and increase antisocial behavior. Exposure to conspiracy theories reduces prosocial intentions in the form of donations to charity and volunteerism [54]. Moreover, conspiracy theories increase people’s willingness to commit everyday crime such as filing false insurance claims, a finding that is mediated by anomie (i.e., a rejection of group norms [55]). Finally, although conspiracy beliefs reduce legitimate forms of political engagement (e.g., voting [51]), they increase illegitimate forms of political engagement such as intentions to violently protest, physically attack police officers, and harass other-minded people online [56,57]. If people consider institutions to be poor role models for group norms and values, it harms how valuable they perceive their community. This has negative implications for social relationships, for instance through reduced cooperation, commitment, and prosocial behavior.

Conclusion

The current review suggests that suspicion of institutions—in the form of distrust and conspiracy theories—deteriorates the quality of people’s social relationships, by undermining at least two basic institutional functions. First, institutions are designed to provide citizens with a generalized sense of safety. Suspicion of institutions therefore implies that people feel less protected by them, which decreases trust between strangers, and fuels prejudice, polarization, and conflict between groups. Second, institutions serve as role models for group norms and values. Suspicion of institutions therefore promotes people’s perception that their community (and their membership in it) is of low worth, which reduces people’s commitment, cooperation, and prosocial behavior. Taken together, these processes suggest that suspicion of institutions erodes the fabric of society by harming people’s interpersonal, within-group, and between-group relationships.

The present contribution reviewed evidence associating the security function with interpersonal and intergroup relationships; moreover, it reviewed evidence

associating the group value function with within-group relationships. It is plausible, however, that both functions have a broader impact. For instance, the security function also shapes within-group relations, as people cooperate less when they feel less protected by institutions [12]. Likewise, the belief that institutional authorities are unfair decision-makers—causing feelings of deprivation and lowering the perceived value of society—stimulates radicalism [58]. Both institutional functions are likely to have implications at all levels of social relationships.

Suspicion of institutions may sometimes be rooted in irrational assumptions (e.g., that the corona virus is a hoax), but at other times it may emerge from actual integrity violations or corruption (e.g., the FIFA corruption scandal). As such, two practical implications follow from our review. First, it is important to take widespread and persistent conspiracy theories seriously and implement interventions to reduce such theories among the public. These interventions may for instance include transparency in decision-making, and increased contact between institutional representatives and citizens [23]. At the same time, the present analysis underscores the importance of having reliable societal institutions in place that are deserving of the public's trust. Actual integrity violations, and high-profile cases of corruption, are likely to increase suspicion of institutions among the public. Hence, interventions designed to prevent or reduce corruption are necessary, to ensure that institutions can legitimately proclaim norms of high integrity and serve as a credible role model of prosocial norms and values [59].

Lord Acton famously proclaimed that “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Many citizens perceive powerful institutions through a similar lens: although institutions are omnipresent in modern society, they often elicit deep feelings of distrust and far-fetched conspiracy theories. The present paper was designed to clarify that such suspicion of institutions comes at a cost, for the perceivers themselves and society at large. Institutions regulate social relationships in ways that are not always salient and are therefore easy to take for granted. Stimulating a harmonious and trusting society starts with institutions that citizens perceive as honest and reliable.

Author contributions

Jan-Willem van Prooijen helped in conceptualization and writing - original draft; Giuliana Spadaro helped in conceptualization and writing - review & editing; and Haiyan Wang helped in writing - review & editing and Visualization.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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* of special interest

** of outstanding interest

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