Enlightened trust in governance

EnTrust

Integrated report on the Psychological Insights into Trust/Distrust

Deliverable 5.2

EnTrust: Enlightened Trust: An Examination of Trust and Distrust in Governance – Conditions, Effects and Remedies

WP5: Developmental-psychological insight into trust/distrust
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Executive Summary

This executive summary provides the overview of the main findings, their implications, and practical recommendations of research carried out within the EnTrust project's Work Package 5, which aimed to analyse conceptualisations, correlates, and antecedents of trust and distrust in governance. Informed by the developmental and cross-country perspective, our research focused on four life stages from early adolescence to adulthood (age groups 11-12, 14-15, 18-19, and 30-50) in different European countries (Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Serbia). We employed a mixed-methods design comprising qualitative focus groups and a large-scale experiment. In the first stage, we organised 56 focus groups with 251 participants from all seven countries. Next, we conducted a survey-based experiment, informed by the insights from the qualitative findings, with 4082 participants from four selected countries (Czechia, Germany, Italy, and Serbia). This comprehensive approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the development of trust and distrust in authorities.

Main findings

Conceptualisations of (dis)trust

- **Participants conceptualised trust and distrust as distinct dimensions that may coexist**.
- **Moderate trust based on critically evaluating available information was considered ideal by participants.** On the contrary, extreme levels of trust and distrust were considered undesirable and linked to complementary risks, e.g., unquestioningly following or rejecting the authorities.
- **General trust in others was perceived as indispensable for a well-functioning society.** At the same time, the role of (dis)trust was viewed as **contextually dependent.**

Sources of (dis)trust

- **Knowledgeability and perceived competency** were key sources of trust in authorities. Participants called for well-founded and well-explained decisions and policies. The arguments must be diverse but not overwhelming, in their view, as information overload promotes uncertainty and distrust.
- Participants were particularly **vigilant towards any signs of policymakers pursuing their own interests**, particularly financial ones.
- **Predictability, transparency, and consistency** contributed to trust, whereas unpredictable actions, ambiguity, and inconsistency facilitate distrust. The unpredictability in implementing and revoking the anti-Covid measures vastly undermined trust in governance.
- **(Dis)trust was largely experiences-based.** People developed and calibrated their (dis)trust based on positive experiences with particular people or authorities. (e.g., honesty, reliability, and confidentiality) and/or negative ones (e.g.,

betrayals or disappointments). Critical experiences could affect not only trust in specific people or authorities, but also individuals' general propensity to (dis)trust. Various critical experiences during the pandemic considerably affected participants' overall (dis)trust in authorities.

- **Reciprocity was integral to trust.** There was a strong expectation that trust should be mutual. Reciprocity in relationships (e.g., confiding in each other, mutual help and support), and shared values and worldviews, were perceived as contributing to trust. The expectation of reciprocity was weaker in formal relationships with authorities compared to interpersonal relationships. However, **perceived distrust from the authorities could elicit reciprocal distrust from the citizens.**

Procedural aspects of authorities' behaviour

- **Positive impacts of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework were universally observed across all countries and contexts**, enhancing trust and acceptance and reducing distrust.
- Participants' trust, distrust, and willingness to accept were influenced by **the additive effects** of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework, indicating that even the presence or absence of a single aspect had a substantial impact. This pattern was consistently observed across countries, contexts, and outcome variables.
- **A key psychological mechanism** explaining the positive effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework was identified as **the sense of being respected**. When authorities engaged in consultation, transparency, or provided a predictable framework, people felt more respected, which in turn led to greater trust, willingness to accept, and reduced distrust. Across various countries and contexts, a stronger sense of respect largely accounted for the overall impact of authorities' behaviour.
- **Younger participants exhibited two trends:** First, they were less influenced by transparency in rationale, with its impact on trust increasing with age. Second, younger participants showed a weaker response to the absence of positive aspects in authorities' behaviour, making the additive effects of voice, transparency, and predictable framework stronger with age. Nevertheless, these findings were replicated in only two out of four countries (Czechia and Serbia) and should therefore be interpreted with caution as the effect could be country specific.
- Psychological processes of (dis)trust in authorities **exhibit similarities across different contexts,** including national decision-making and everyday management, implying the applicability of these processes to both distal and proximal relationships with authorities. Although contextual differences may be important, our findings underscore the significance of general processes that influence (dis)trust in authorities.

Age differences

- The awareness of society-wide impacts of (dis)trust and the ability to consider distrust in a more generalised manner, appreciate and appraise information, and draw on various life experiences when developing (dis)trust towards other people or authorities increased with age.
- Confidentiality in the form of keeping secrets was particularly important for the youngest age groups (11-15) when developing trust, while adult participants emphasised shared values and worldviews.
- The younger age groups (11-15) highly relied on parents or other family members when forming (dis)trust in authorities.

Practical implications and recommendations

1. Citizens call for factual, logical, and scientifically-sound arguments that simultaneously do not defy common sense. Weakly justified decisions, e.g., through appeals to authority, might be initially effective in times of crisis, but citizens tend to scrutinise the decision-making process and demand well-substantiated decisions in the long term. Governance and policymakers should pay careful attention to establishing sound reasoning for their decisions.
2. In order to increase trust and willingness to accept their decisions, authorities should explicitly and predictably communicate the rationale underlying their decision-making.
3. Taking an active part in evaluating diverse information and making up one's mind about political decisions are highly important for citizens. They value moderate, rather than unconditional, unquestioning trust and participatory decision-making processes. Authorities should take this into consideration when they issue measures, regulations, and policies and include citizens and experts in the decision-making process.
4. While citizens highly value critical thinking and (at least partially) autonomous decision-making, they also concede that information-seeking is often difficult and overwhelming. Encountering contradictory, inconsistent information largely contributes to distrust. Thus, authorities should utilise advisory boards to select the most pertinent information from verified sources, and then utilise this information to support their decisions.
5. Changing or revoking decisions is acceptable if transparent, predictable, well-justified, and well-explained. Authorities must, however, be careful about presenting decisions with high certainty and confidence, as retracting such decisions, especially without sufficient and transparent rationale, fosters distrust in authorities in general.
6. Taking into consideration the accumulative nature of the impacts of participatory decision-making (i.e., including citizens' and experts' voices), transparency in rationale, and predictable actions, or the lack thereof, on the overall sense of (not) being respected by the authorities, which is crucial for distrust, trust, and willingness to accept their decisions, the authorities should strive to employ all aforementioned positive aspects of authorities' behaviour.

1. Introduction to the Study of the Psychological Insights into Trust/Distrust

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Psychology understands trust as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Despite an abundance of conceptualisations and approaches, according to an overarching definition, trust refers to a willingness to accept vulnerability in situations of uncertainty based on the belief that the other party will act in one's interest (Mayer et al., 1995; Thielman & Hilbig, 2015). This definition applies in situations involving interpersonal relationships, but also in situations of hierarchy and power imbalance. A crucial aspect of such situations is trust in social and political authorities that are typically expected to behave according to specific norms associated with their social roles (Jackson & Gau, 2016; Tyler & Degoey, 1996). Trust in authorities is a well-known predictor of people´s compliance, cooperation, decision acceptance, and voluntary rule-following behaviour (e.g., Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Tyler & Jackson, 2014; Tyler & Trinkner, 2017). Therefore, trust in authorities represents a relevant topic for psychological research, especially regarding how and why trust occurs, how it develops over time and with age, what factors play roles in the trust-forming processes in various contexts, and how individual differences between people arise.

Generally, two psychological models of trust development can be distinguished – the dispositional and the experiential (Dinesen & Bekkers, 2017). The dispositional perspective expects trust to be stable across situations and relationships during the lifespan. It links the bases for generalised dispositional trust to genetic predispositions, early-life experiences with caregivers, and positive experiences in the process of socialisation (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1963). As soon as the level of generalised trust is established during the formative years of early childhood and adolescence, trust propensity becomes stable and not easily affected by later experiences (Dinesen & Bekkers, 2017; Lewicki et al., 2006; Uslaner, 2002). On the other hand, the experiential perspective expects trust to be a subject of change across the lifespan. Even though the experiential perspective acknowledges the crucial role of early experiences, it claims that trust is continually calibrated throughout one's life based on positive and negative experiences in diverse social situations (Dinesen & Bekkers, 2017; van Lange, 2015). While both perspectives emphasise different aspects of trust development, they are not mutually exclusive. From the integrative viewpoint, we can assume that ongoing experiences keep their relevance, but people always interpret them through the lens of their relatively stable generalised trust propensity.

One of the most elaborated psychological approaches to capture the experiential aspect of trust towards authorities is the procedural justice approach. It claims that trust

in authorities is based on the experience with fair (or unfair) procedures that the authorities use to exercise their power. Fair procedures contribute to perceptions of authorities as more trustworthy and legitimate, making people more willing to accept their decisions (e.g., Huo, 2002; Tyler, 2001, 2012; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). The procedural justice approach typically considers two aspects of the authorities' behaviour: the quality of their decision-making processes, including consistency and transparency, and the way authorities treat people: showing benevolence, concern, and dignity (Tyler & Trinkner, 2017). In addition, formal and informal aspects can be distinguished, which means that trust is influenced by formal rules ensuring fairness and quality treatment, and the actual implementation of these rules and informal behaviour (Tyler & Blader, 2003).

Despite considerable knowledge of how specific procedures and interactions with authorities shape people's trust or distrust, still less is known about how people themselves interpret these experiences, how the experiences interact with preexisting beliefs and attitudes (including generalised propensity to trust), and how these processes change with age. Previous studies on trust development were often concerned with how trust stabilises during the life course. For instance, interpersonal trust during adolescence seems to have low stability (e.g., Janmaat, 2019) and increased openness to influences from outside (Lundberg & Abdelzadeh, 2019). At the same time, trust becomes more stable and resistant to external factors from early to middle to late adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Abdelzadeh & Lundberg, 2017; Flanagan & Stout, 2010; Janmaat, 2019). Consequently, the relative stability of trust can be expected between late adolescence and adulthood (Dawson, 2019; Stolle & Hooghe, 2004; Wu, 2021). These findings indicate a potentially crucial role of adolescence in trust development, including trust-related experiences during this life period. However, the previous findings apply mainly to interpersonal trust. Therefore, the study of trust in authorities would benefit from further attempts that would take a developmental perspective to investigate trust across different stages of life, from early adolescence to adulthood.

Our work package deals with trust in four life stages: early adolescence, middle adolescence, late adolescence, and (middle) adulthood. These stages are in our research represented by four age groups aged 11-12, 14-15, 18-19, and 30-50, respectively.

Four age cohorts: Thinking, decision-making and social cognition from a developmental perspective

Adolescence is characterised by immense developmental changes in cognition. The ability to critically evaluate information and think abstractly develops at this stage, together with formal operational thinking and being able to interpretate social reality, which develops between the ages of 11 and 15 (Amsel, 2011; Piaget, 1972). Thinking becomes more abstract and complex during adolescence, and the reality of everyday

life is supplemented with hypothetical alternatives and possibilities. The bases of critical thinking are in the form of long-term memory development, and an ability to consider various perspectives of reality and metacognition (Keating et al., 2023).

Adolescent thinking and decision-making are explained by two recent theories that describe two distinct cognitive systems: the analytic system based on formal operational thinking, and the heuristic system, based on intuitive use of past experience, emotions and unconscious motives. If an adolescent has intuitive reasons for accepting a certain argument, their acceptance of the argument is often based on questionable analytical reasoning. This decision-making bias tends to persist into young adulthood, even though it decreases during adolescence (Klaczynski, 2005).

Based on behavioural decision theory (Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002; Slovic et al., 1977), the adolescent decision-making processes include identifying a range of possible choices and identifying possible consequences of each choice (Arnett, 2010). Even though younger adolescents (11-12 years) are able to see a variety of options when dealing with a problem (compared to children), they do not foresee the consequences to the extent older adolescents can. When decisions are made in social situations, younger adolescents tend to perceive the situation and/or the actors in the situation in a polarised way, as either right or wrong. More reflective ways of judging situations develop at the end of adolescence (normatively at around 18 years; Arnett, 2010).

At the age of 30 and over, the period described as full adulthood, postformal thinking is typical (Sinnott, 1989). Postformal thinking is characterised by integrative and provisional thinking, reflective judgements, contextualisation and relativism and the ability to recognise emotions and intuition in decision-making and reasoning. These characteristics of thinking significantly influence how one perceives and interprets social reality. Compared to adolescents, adults are capable of accepting cognitive uncertainty in their decision-making processes, taking into consideration the specific social context and situational factors while interpreting events, and seeking compromise and pragmatic solutions more often (Santrock, 2007).

The outline of Work Package 5

This report presents the findings of Work Package 5, whose main objective was to analyse conceptualisations, correlates, and antecedents of trust and distrust in governance. We applied the cross-country and developmental perspectives, focusing on life stages from the onset of adolescence to adulthood (age groups 11-12, 14-15, 18-19, and 30-50). Our work had three main goals:

1. to develop an analytical model of how individuals at various life stages (from early adolescence to adulthood) construct their conceptualisations of trust and distrust;
2. to identify the roles of specific everyday experiences in proximal contexts (e.g., in families, schools, or peer groups) that are employed by adolescents and

adults to construct their expectations of trust or distrust in more distal public institutions and authorities;

3. to investigate the aspects of governance (or, more generally, the behaviour of authorities) that increase and decrease perceived legitimacy, including trust and distrust, and developmental changes of the relative importance of these aspects.

We decided to utilize the Covid-19 pandemic as a model trust-relevant situation in the national context. This decision was informed by the idea that trust is inherently related to situations characterised by a certain degree of uncertainty and personal vulnerability, that is, situations in which one can be potentially deceived, exploited, or harmed (Hamm et al., 2017; Yamagishi, 2011). We considered the Covid-19 pandemic to be a striking example of such a situation, suggesting a potentially essential role of trust in authorities. To control the pandemic, the authorities issued a number of measures whose scale had been unthinkable for decades, and these measures could have been potentially harmful due to their serious impact on people's everyday routines, personal relationships, or work and educational activities. At the same time, the anti-pandemic measures affected every sector of society, with even the youngest age cohorts having experienced the impact of these measures on their lives, especially considering homeschooling, wearing masks at school later on, etc. We started our qualitative data collection in spring 2022, when the pandemic was ending and its impacts were still significant.

The data were gathered using a mixed-methods methodology. In the first stage, qualitative focus groups were conducted in all participating countries (Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Serbia). The second stage was a quantitative large-scale survey-based experiment, informed by previous focus group findings, conducted in four countries (Czechia, Germany, Italy, and Serbia).

Specific qualitative research questions were:

- What are the meanings of (dis)trust in public authorities and institutions which issued measures to control Covid-19 in different age groups?
- How are the sources of (dis)trust constructed in this context in public authorities and institutions in different age groups?
- What are the meanings of (dis)trust in interpersonal relationships in different age groups?
- How are the sources of (dis)trust constructed within the domain of interpersonal relationships in different age groups?

Research questions that lead the quantitative part were:

- How are the aspects of authorities' behaviour – voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework – related to people's (dis)trust and willingness to accept decisions?
- Are these effects additive or conditional?
- Does the sense of being respected mediate these effects?

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- Are these effects moderated by age?

This report is structured in the following way. Chapter 2 describes the overall research methodology of the qualitative part. National reports on qualitative results from the seven participating countries are included in Chapters 3 to 9. Chapter 10 describes the methodology and results of the quantitative survey-based experiment. Finally, Chapter 11 provides conclusions based on the main findings from the whole Work Package.

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2. Research Methodology of the Qualitative Part

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To capture trust and distrust from early adolescence to adulthood, we conducted age-homogeneous focus groups with participants from four age groups: early adolescence (age 11-12), middle adolescence (age 14-15), late adolescence (age 18-19), and adulthood (age 30-50). The same research methodology was used in seven countries (Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Serbia) to identify potential cross-country patterns, similarities, and differences.

All focus groups were held online using reliable videoconferencing platforms. We developed the following sampling criteria: (1) participants must have previous experience with the online environment and be able to communicate online; (2) no medical or psychological condition/s hindering participants' active participation in the focus group should be present; (3) participants must be native speakers, or have language skills comparable to native speakers; and (4) participants in any one focus group should not have close personal knowledge of each other (e.g., they should not be relatives, close friends, classmates, teammates, etc.), but they may superficially know each other (e.g., go to the same school, or work at the same company). In addition to the main sampling criteria, country research teams aimed at ensuring balanced composition of each focus group in terms of gender, educational background, and place of living, which was facilitated by employing the online format (e.g., interviewees from more distant locations did not need to travel to participate).

Table 2.1 below displays the number of interviewees who participated in the focus groups by country, age group, and gender.

Table 2.1 Number of Interviewees in Each Country

Country	Age groups				Total
	11-12	**14-15**	**18-19**	**30+**	
Czechia	11 (5 f; 6 m)	9 (6 f; 3 m)	8 (4 f; 4 m)	11 (5 f; 6 m)	39
Denmark	9 (7 f; 2 m)	11 (6 f; 5 m)	9 (5 f; 4 m)	9 (4 f; 5 m)	38
Germany	8 (4 f; 4 m)	7 (3 f; 4 m)	9 (4 f; 5 m)	8 (4 f; 4 m)	32
Greece	9 (4 f; 5 m)	10 (6 f; 4 m)	9 (6 f; 3 m)	9 (6 f; 3 m)	37
Italy	8 (4 f; 4 m)	8 (4 f; 4 m)	8 (4 f; 4 m)	8 (4 f; 4 m)	32
Poland	7 (4 f; 3 m)	6 (5 f; 1 m)	6 (3 f; 2 m; 1 nb)	6 (3 f; 3 m)	25
Serbia	12 (6 f; 6 m)	12 (5 f; 7 m)	12 (6 f; 6 m)	12 (6 f; 6 m)	48
Total	**64**	**63**	**61**	**63**	**251**

Note. "f" = female, "m" = male, and "nb" = non-binary.

The recruitment procedure relied on convenience sampling, utilising diverse recruitment strategies. We primarily recruited participants by contacting schools, youth organisations, and leisure time and sports organisations, and asking them to distribute leaflets and posters and approach potential interviewees directly. Researchers' personal networks were also used. Additional convenience sampling strategies were employed in some countries when the research team needed to exercise greater effort to meet the predefined quota. The recruitment proved to be particularly challenging in the younger age groups. More detailed descriptions of recruitment procedures employed in every country can be found in the national reports.

We carried out a total of 56 focus group interviews in seven countries (two focus groups with every age group were organised per country). We aimed at organising focus groups consisting of four to six participants, resulting in the minimum of 32 participants per country, 224 participants in total. The expected total number of participants was reached (N = 251), including the minimum expected number of participants per country, with the exception of Poland (due to recruitment challenges; for a detailed explanation, see the national report). All focus group interviews were carried out between May 2022 and December 2022, video-recorded, and transcribed with sufficient detail for analysis. The typical length of a focus group interview was about 65 minutes, with the shortest interview taking 30 minutes and the longest one lasting 98 minutes (both the shortest and the longest were conducted in Greece).

Focus group interviews were conducted using detailed guidelines comprising about 20 mandatory or optional interview questions accompanied by standardised texts (e.g., introductory and concluding texts and prompts). The guidelines were translated into the respective languages by country research teams. Pretests were conducted to ensure the clarity and suitability of the questions for all age groups. Prior to every focus group, we used short questionnaires to collect key demographic characteristics of the participants. Finally, we employed the dual-moderator approach. Two moderators were present in each focus group: the main moderator asked the main questions and directed the discussion, while the supporting moderator ensured that all main questions were covered, asked additional questions, and provided technical support (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

We analysed the data using reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). We employed the inductive approach and semantic codes, conducting the analysis within an essentialist/realist framework (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Each country research team followed the six-phase process explicated by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) creating candidate themes by iteratively grouping the codes, (4) reviewing the candidate themes against the data, (5) defining and named the final themes, and (6) producing the write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Country research teams were also instructed to focus on age differences within the constructed themes to capture the developmental changes. The coding was done using analytical software. The codes were detailed, consisting of a label, a semantic description of the coded segment in English, and interpretative memos (where applicable). Before and during the procedure, we conducted two

coder-training workshops, one on creating codes and one on creating themes, to ensure that coders in all teams adhered to the same procedure. We also offered further methodological support and feedback to the country research teams, if needed. Finally, we prepared a national report template to standardise the process further.

Throughout all stages of our research, we adhered to the highest ethical standards. The overall research design, focus group guidelines, and informed consent forms have been reviewed and approved by research ethics committees of the participating universities. Prior to conducting the focus groups, consent forms were obtained from adult interviewees, and two consent forms were required from interviewees aged 17 and under, from both the participants and their parents. While transcribing the interviews, we paid attention to the security of the files and immediate anonymisation of the data. We developed guidelines for handling quotes when writing the reports to ensure our interviewees' anonymity. We also purposely did not provide detailed information about the interviewees' demographic characteristics. Finally, country research teams did not share the original datasets, only the anonymised codes in English.

The following national reports represent seven case studies on conceptualisations and sources of trust and distrust in governance. The concluding chapter of the report presents a synthesis of the findings. This part also discusses the major similarities, differences, and age patterns across countries.

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3. Exploration of Trust-Building Narratives among the Czechs: The Role of Life Experience and Sources of Trust and Distrust

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1. The Covid-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic

1.1. First wave (March 2020 – June 2020)

Information about the first three people with confirmed Covid-19 diagnosis in the Czech Republic appears in the Czech media on March 1st, 2020. After that, the number of infected and diagnosed cases increases, starting at 18:00 on March 10th, 2020; all events with more than 100 participants are cancelled, and the schools are closed (except the kindergartens) from March 11th, 2020, until further notice.

On March 13th, 2020 the government announces that the Czech Republic is under a state of emergency, and all events with more than 30 participants are prohibited (except governmental meetings, court of law proceedings, and funerals). Starting at midnight, all transportation (bus, train, boat) from the Czech Republic to neighbouring countries is stopped. The day after that all restaurants and bars are closed (except canteens at the places of work), and all the shops are closed (except for the necessary places such as gas stations, drug stores, pharmacies and grocery stores, among a few others). Starting at midnight, March 16th, 2020, the free movement of individuals is prohibited (except necessary means of transport to get to work, doctors´ appointments, etc.). On March 19th, 2020, the Prime Minister announces that it is prohibited not to wear a face mask, or otherwise cover one´s face. There are over 1,000 infected in the Czech Republic by March 22nd, 2020, and one day later, the first Czechian person dies from Covid-19.

Starting on April 7th, 2020, people can do sports outside, and some specific types of shops are open again on April 9th, 2020 (hobby markets, bike services, etc.). By the end of April 2020, there are over 10,000 infected people in the Czech Republic. By the end of April, 10, people can group outside, personal consultations of university students are allowed.

On May 11th, 2020, the last years of primary schools and secondary schools are back at school in person. By the end of May, protective masks are worn only indoors, further, workers who sit two metres apart do not have to wear masks at their workplace. The beginning of June sees the voluntary return of pupils at school, but with only 10 (later 15) pupils in a group. June 8th, 2020: restaurants open even after 11 pm; events up to 500 people are allowed.

1.2. Second and third wave (September 2020 – June 2021)

The situation gets worse in September when events of 500 people are restricted again, and masks are once more mandatory on public transportation, as well as indoors. Again, restaurants and all establishments are closed from 10 pm to 6 am. The first time that the daily increase of infected individuals reaches over 3,000 is on September 18th, 2020, when the second wave hits the country. By the end of September, there are over 50,000 infected. 26% of polled citizens think that wearing a face mask is not preventative, and that it does not work against Covid-19 (Spurný, 2020). The **Health Minister, Adam Vojtěch, is dismissed**, and a new health minister, **Roman Prymula, takes on the position.**

Over 3,000 people die from Covid-19 by October, 2020. On October 5th, 2020, a state of emergency is announced. Schools are now operating under the regional hygienic station´s rules, and they are closed after the region falls under the so-called red light, which means the situation is worsening. All academic and non-academic employees at schools at all levels have to wear a face mask. No physical education at schools (except in the first grade of elementary school) is allowed. By mid-October, university students are prohibited from attending in-person sessions (there are exceptions dealing for medics, etc.). Pupils in the second grade of elementary schools are divided into half-classes, and take turns attending face-to-face classes at school. The autumn holidays are prolonged. Elementary schools are closed until November 2nd. Starting on October 21st, 2020, people have to wear face masks even in cars. By the end of October, free movement of persons through the Czech Republic is prohibited**. Roman Prymula resigns from his position as health minister** because he has been seen in a closed restaurant with a few other individuals, despite the restrictions and anti-Covid measures. The new health **minister, Jan Blatný, is now in that position**.

In November, students start returning to schools, but most senior classes alternate between regular and remote lessons. Several protests and demonstrations against anti-Covid measures take place between October and December, 2020.

By the end of December, schools are closed (except kindergarten, and first and second years of elementary schools). Starting December 18th, 2020, stricter measures are applied again; schools have a prolonged Christmas vacation. Shopping centres can open under specific conditions; there is a ban on alcohol consumption in public. Restaurants and bars are closed again. University and students´ accommodation services are closed.

On January 1st, 2021, the Covid-19 vaccination is rolled out in the Czech Republic. Entrance exams for universities and vocational secondary schools are allowed for no more than 10 people per group. Protests against vaccination (anti-vaccine movement) take place.

By February 25th, 2021, over 20,000 people have died from Covid-19 in the Czech Republic. In March, a new state of emergency is declared for 14 days. After that, another state of emergency comes into practice, and lasts until March 28th, 2021. Everyone everywhere has to wear a FFP2 respiratory safety mask. March 1st: all schools and

kindergartens are closed (except services for critical infrastructure employees). March 3rd: employers have to arrange antigen test for employees. End of March: people can do sports and walks in nature within their district.

Since April 2021, secondary school pupils can attend practical training. The slow opening of kindergartens and the first level of elementary schools differs from region to region. On April 25th, 2021, shops and services open again**. Jan Blatný resigns from the position of Health Minister** based on his own decision, and a new health minister **Petr Arenberger, takes on the position**.

Pupils return to school with mandatory testing, twice a week at first, then once a week in May 2021. Cultural events are allowed; restaurants can open their outdoor seating areas, but all customers have to provide a negative Covid-19 test, proof of vaccination, or they must have some immunity from a recent bout of Covid-19 (within the last 90 days). Masks are not required outdoors. Pupils go back to school without the rotation of classes (where it was still applied). Petr Arenberger quits the position of Health Minister, as he has been called out in the media for having unacknowledged property, and discrepancies in his tax declarations. **Adam Vojtěch takes on the position again.**

At the beginning of June, teachers and students do not have to wear face masks. On June 22nd, 2021, on returning from the countries on the at-risk list, one has to have a completed form and undergo a Covid-19 test. Different rules for vaccinated and unvaccinated people are in practice (basically, the unvaccinated have to provide a negative test for the workplace, public events, etc.). The situation remains relatively stable until November 2021.

1.3. Further development

In October 2021, Parliamentary elections take place in the Czech Republic, and the current leading party loses and a new parliament is formed. Adam Vojtěch is replaced by Vlastimil Válek in the position of Health Minister, due to the elections, and a change of a leading party in government (end of the year).

On November 17th, 2021, the highest daily increase of infections from the start of the pandemic occurs: over 22,400 cases. On November 26th, 2021, the government announces a state of emergency for the next 30 days in the country, with the anti-Covid measures getting stricter again, meaning stricter rules for restaurants and bars and other gathering places, testing (PCR) at schools twice a week, or regular testing of employees. Another protest against vaccination and anti-Covid measures takes place.

In the beginning of 2022, the regulations of mass events are lifted, except the number of attending people that is still controlled. Schools are open, but testing continues. During January 2022, two protests against anti-Covid measures take place. Testing at schools and at work is not mandatory later in the spring, 2022.

The data collection took place between June and September, 2022, when no specific measures were applied (except some that regulate travelling to at-risk countries). The

situation was relatively stable, with minor fluctuations in the number of infected and those diagnosed with Covid-19 probably due to holiday travel of Czech citizens during the summer, but stabilising in late autumn.

1.4. Development of a public opinion about the anti-Covid measures and trust towards the government and the president

The Public Opinion Research Centre organised several data collections where the main question was the level of trust towards different state representatives and institutions. **The trust of Czech citizens towards the president and the government** in March 2020 looks as follows: 37% rather trusted the president and 13% definitely trusted the president, while 38% citizens rather trusted the government and 7% definitely trusted the government (Červenka, 2020). **The visible change started in June 2021**, when 21% of polled citizens rather trusted the president and 8% definitely trusted him. Also, trust towards government took a big hit in June 2021, when 24% of polled citizens rather trusted and 4% definitely trusted the government (Červenka, 2021). **These numbers slowly increased up to the spring 2022, but fell gain between September-November, 2022,** when 28% rather trusted the president and 5% definitely trusted him, and 26% rather trusted the government and 2% definitely trusted the government (Červenka, 2022). The presidential elections were fast approaching (beginning of 2023), which may also have had an impact on the opinions of the citizens.

The same research centre also asked citizens whether they thought that there **were enough anti-Covid measures introduced by the government**. In 2020, the numbers of citizens who thought that there were not enough measures started to increase from June to September from 8% to 23% (Tuček, 2020). The same happened in 2021, when 37% polled citizens thought there were not enough measures against Covid-19 in April, then a slight decrease in June and July (20%; 12% respectively), and an increase again in November 2021 to 27% (Čadová, 2021, 2022).

2. Procedure and participants

The procedure was consulted and approved across all participating countries. The team from the Czech Republic coordinated the development of research materials. Four researchers then participated in the data collection in two pairs. The focus group transcription was carried out by a single researcher. In addition, another two researchers collaborated on the data analysis, and one researcher took the position of auditor (Schlosser et al., 2012) to ensure logical and conceptual robustness of the themes. Therefore, a total of eight researchers participated in this qualitative study. A total of eight focus groups were conducted – two for each age group (11-12, 14-15, 18-19 and 30+).

2.1. Procedure

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Masaryk University (approval No. EKV-2019-072). Apart from pilot interviews and one pilot focus group, overall, eight focus groups with 39 interviewees across four age groups (details in participants' section below) were conducted. Younger interviewees (to 18 years of age) received informed consent through their parents, who received two informed consent forms via e-mail, one for themselves and one for their adolescent. Signed documents were sent back to the team members. For the interviewees above 18 years of age (18-19 and 30+ age groups), only one informed consent form from the interviewee was signed and collected in the same way.

The first pilot interview was done with twins (12.5 years old), both girls, and the second interview was with a boy (12 years old). After these two interviews, we concluded that the questions were too hard for children this age to answer, so we simplified the questions but did not change the meaning. After that, we did a pilot focus group with two boys and two girls (all 12 years old). The focus group went well, the participants understood all the questions and were able to express interesting opinions. For the older age groups (14-15, 18-19 and 30+), we checked understanding of the questions in individual interviews. This set of questions was used in the later focus groups and was translated into English for the other teams.

Regarding the focus groups, four team members were moderators, and two were always present in each focus group. One team member was the main moderator; he or she asked the main questions according to the prepared structure, and as a main moderator, directed the topic of the discussion with additional questions. The other team member's role was to provide the technical support, and ask additional questions to support the main moderator. All the focus groups were conducted online through the Microsoft Teams' platform. Focus groups were on average 67 minutes long, with 63 and 74 minutes as minimum and maximum length. The first focus group was conducted in June and the last in September 2022. The majority of the focus groups was conducted in July and August. During the focus groups, no unexpected events occurred which would strongly disrupt their progress. During the focus groups, several respondents had problems with their online connection, but in each case, the connection was quickly restored.

The transcriptions of all focus groups were conducted by a single researcher. Individual focus groups were recorded with the consent of the respondents, and verbal (orthographic) transcriptions were made from the recordings within a few weeks of data collection. The transcriptions were anonymised and created with sufficient detail to be useful for analyses focusing on the interpretation of meaning from text (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At the same time, they were also created with parsimony in mind, that is, with sufficient detail to be sufficient for further planned analyses (Howitt, 2016). The basic structure and coherence of the conversations were captured, along with larger pauses during speech. Basic phonetic information, gestures, and basic intonational and more complex phonetic units (such as sarcasm) were also captured.

2.2. Participants

Participants were divided into four age groups, 11-12; 14-15; 18-19 and 30+ years of age. There were 39 participants (19 males and 20 females). Each focus group consisted of 4-6 participants, one focus group (14-15) consisted of 3 females and one male participant, all other focus groups were more balanced regarding gender. Nineteen participants were from big cities, and the prevailing parental education level was university or college. The prevailing educational track of the participants from two younger age groups was elementary school (regular); in 18-19 age group it was vocational school. The highest achieved education in the oldest age group was university or college in 6 cases, and high school in 5 cases. The mean age of the 30+ age group was 37.3 years of age (min: 31; max: 48).

The sample recruitment was primarily conducted with the help of personal contacts or through social network sites, utilising nonprobability sampling methods. Before beginning, we gathered information pertaining to the purpose of the research, the methodology, and the appropriate participants we sought to recruit. This information was then spread through colleagues at Masaryk University, and other personal contacts who identified suitable people for the study. Potential interviewees were contacted personally (with parental consent for the younger ages), and asked to participate in the research. The focus groups were structured to ensure maximum diversity in composition, and to ensure that the respondents were not familiar with one another. The demographic characteristics of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 *Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

	Age	Gender	School track / highest education	Education mother	Education father	Place of living
Focus group 11–12 A (*n* = 5)						
1	11	Male	Elementary school (regular)	University or college	University or college	A big city
2	12	Male	Elementary school (alternative)	University or college	High school	A town or a small city
3	12	Female	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
4	12	Female	Elementary school (regular)	University or college	University or college	A big city
5	12	Male	Elementary school (regular)	High school	University or college	A country village
Focus group 11–12 B (*n* = 6)						
1	11	Male	Elementary school (alternative)	University or college	University or college	A big city

2	12	Female	Elementary school (regular)	University or college	High school	A country village
3	11	Female	Elementary school (alternative)	High school	High school	A country village
4	11	Female	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A country village
5	12	Male	Elementary school (alternative)	University or college	High school	A big city
6	11	Male	Elementary school (regular)	High school	University or college	A big city
Focus group 14–15 A (*n* = 4)						
1	14	Female	Elementary school (regular)	University or college	University or college	A country village
2	14	Female	Elementary school (regular)	University or college	University or college	A town or a small city
3	14	Male	Elementary school (alternative)	High school	University or college	A big city
4	15	Female	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
Focus group 14–15 B (*n* = 5)						
1	15	Female	Elementary school (regular)	High school	University or college	A town or a small city
2	14	Female	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A town or a small city
3	14	Male	Grammar school	High school	High school	A country village
4	14	Male	Elementary school (regular)	University or college	University or college	A country village
5	15	Female	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
Focus group 18–19 A (*n* = 4)						
1	19	Male	Vocational high school	High school	High school	A big city
2	18	Female	Grammar school	High school	High school	A town or a small city
3	19	Male	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
4	18	Female	Vocational high school	University or college	University or college	A country village
Focus group 18–19 B (*n* = 4)						

1	18	Female	Grammar school	University or collage	University or college	Suburbs
2	18	Female	Grammar school	University or collage	University or college	A country village
3	18	Male	Vocational high school	High school	High school	A big city
4	18	Male	Vocational high school	High school	High school	A town or a small city
Focus group 30+ A (*n* = 6)						
1	38	Male	University or college			A big city
2	42	Male	High school			A big city
3	36	Female	University or college			A big city
4	34	Male	University or college			A big city
5	46	Female	High school			A big city
6	33	Female	University or college			A village near to big city
Focus group 30+ B (*n* = 5)						
1	35	Male	High school			A country village
2	31	Male	University or college			A big city
3	48	Female	University or college			A big city
4	32	Male	High school			A town or a small city
5	35	Female	University or college			A country village

2.3. Data analysis

Transcriptions of the focus groups were analysed in MAXQDA coding software (VERBI Software, 2021). In addition to Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) recommendations, the theme creation process consisted of **four iterative practical steps**.

First, a detailed coding process was conducted by a total of six researchers working in pairs. One researcher created the codes, and the second one reviewed them. They then switched roles for another focus group. The codes themselves had three parts: a

label, a semantic description of the coded segment in English, and in some cases, separate analytical memos by the coders. The codes were primarily semantic, with the labels and short summaries representing semantic (inductive) elements, and the researcher's memos representing, in some cases, more latent (deductive) elements.

In the second step, the creation of higher codes was carried out using a process similar to the code mapping approach described by Saldaña (2015). Individual codes were grouped into broader ones that captured the meaning of the whole set of codes. However, we did not nest the individual codes within the broader ones as Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend, but rather the higher codes contained the individual ones that saturated them. Additionally, we created multiple levels of these broad codes, starting with the least deductive ones, and progressing to the most deductive ones.

In the third step, themes were created from the broad codes. Sometimes the broadest codes had the characteristics of emerging themes themselves, and sometimes themes were saturated by several broad codes. In the process of creating themes, we also utilised the memos associated with individual codes (both semantic and interpretive), and the numerous notes taken by participating researchers. Additionally, each researcher thoroughly read the entire dataset and gained familiarity with the data through an initial reading, coding of individual codes, and subsequent coding of broader codes. This process ultimately led to the creation of themes. The themes were developed by three researchers, with each researcher mainly responsible for two of them.

Finally, after the construction of broad themes across all data, we examined the variations in age within these themes. Rather than focusing solely on counts, we concentrated on the changing meanings in different age groups. Counts were still important, particularly in cases where a topic (or broader code) was completely absent from certain age groups. However, our primary focus was on how different age groups conceptualise the constructed themes, and captured constructs in various ways.

Resembling **the auditing process** in consensual qualitative research, a researcher who is an expert on the topic and was not part of the primary coding team reviewed the themes for clarity, non-redundancy, and appropriateness. The researcher also reviewed the logical and conceptual robustness of the organisation of the themes. Finally, the researcher wrote the discussion section. The team members who conducted the coding reviewed the discussion section, and checked it against the raw data. Auditing lends an additional, big-picture perspective, and prevents group-level bias, increasing rigour, objectivity, and representativeness (Schlosser et al., 2012).

3. Results from the thematic analysis

The following six themes have been constructed: the first two, 'The Boundaries of Moderate (Dis)Trust' and 'Generalisation of (Dis)Trust Across Contexts' focus on the conceptualisation of trust and distrust in the institutional (Covid-19) and interpersonal contexts. Both contexts are relevant and complementary in these themes. The remain-

ing four themes focus on the factors that influence (dis)trust in the institutional or interpersonal contexts. The first of these themes, 'The Effects of Positive and Negative Life Experiences on (Dis)Trust' and 'The Need for a Predictable Framework' are also relevant in both contexts. The fifth theme, 'The Quest for Meaning - Well-Founded Measures and Well-Acquainted People' primarily focuses on the sources of (dis)trust in the institutional context. In contrast, the final theme, 'Reciprocity' primarily focuses on reciprocity as an important source of trust in the interpersonal context.

3.1. Theme 1: The boundaries of moderate (dis)trust

This theme refers to what the interviewees perceived as optimal levels of (dis)trust, and involves concepts such as **moderate (dis)trust, the absence (vacuum) of (dis)trust, blind (dis)trust, or trust and distrust as two separate spectrums / continuums**. While moderate (dis)trust was seen as optimal by the interviewees, the absence (vacuum) of (dis)trust was described as problematic, especially if it meant not caring or lacking interest. Nevertheless, the interviewees described the extremes of the (dis)trust spectrums as the most problematic, that is, blind trust or distrust, which might share similar risks and consequences, according to them.

The first aspect of (dis)trust, which has its own consequences, is when trust or distrust were absent. Specifically, when people did not evaluate the situation, the institution, or the other person from a (dis)trust perspective. This could be referred to as the absence (vacuum) of (dis)trust. This state of missing evaluation could lead to a certain level of (dis)trust only when the stimulus is sufficiently significant (interesting, urgent) for the interviewees to evaluate it. In such a case, the interviewees evaluated (dis)trust to some extent, but ideally not to its extremes. Various interviewees reported that extreme (dis)trust is potentially negative, and has similar negative consequences. This extreme level of (dis)trust could also be referred to, because of its consequences, as 'blind (dis)trust'. Finally, the ideal level of (dis)trust that the interviewees described was absent from this extreme (blind) evaluation. Interviewees associated this moderate level of (dis)trust with various positive consequences. Whether it was the ability to form one's own opinion, flexibly evaluate various subjects of (dis)trust, or avoid quick and hasty evaluations of various situations. Therefore, we referred to these middle levels (continuums / spectrums) of (dis)trust here as moderate and optimal. Subsequently, interviewees also **described possible simultaneous existence of trust and distrust** towards one subject of (dis)trust (person or institution) in a similar context (situations, topics). Therefore, it can be assumed that trust and distrust are closely related, but often meaning-specific constructs.

(Dis)trust may arise depending on a particular subject of (dis)trust. It seems that people need to consciously evaluate subjects of (dis)trust and form an opinion about the situation, institution, or person that could lead to trust or distrust. Therefore, as a basic element in the formation of (dis)trust, the evaluation (or absence thereof) of the subjects of (dis)trust could be considered.

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Various interviewees described that a certain interest in the subjects being evaluated is necessary in order to evaluate trust or distrust. For example: '(...) Um, I have to admit that I haven't really been looking into the government much until now, but... or like, I don't really care about it [what government does] much' (CZ 11-12 A). Without interest and attention to the measures, (dis)trust cannot be evaluated. One of the interviewees subsequently added that sometimes, the stimuli themselves were significant enough that they have forced him to form an opinion despite his lack of interest:

> *(...) I never paid attention to it before, the government, and (...) and I didn't care about it. So... for the first time... It didn't matter to me at all what they were doing. But then I started... because it was too much for me... sitting in front of the computer all the time, my head hurts, so I started to find out a little bit about it ... and ... and so on* (CZ 11-12 A).

Another interviewee added that even though he tried to form his own opinion, his parents influenced his (dis)trust. The restrictions did not directly affect him. Therefore, he was not particularly interested in dealing with them:

> *Of course, my mum and dad influenced me. But otherwise, I always tried to form my own opinion on it... yeah... but it [the restrictions] didn't really affect me, so I didn't really want to deal with it. I just was [I just lived my life]* (CZ 14-15 B).

Interviewees also mentioned that it is important to make a conscious decision on whether to trust or not to trust. One of the interviewees, for example, considers as important in interpersonal relationships to: '(...) choose the right people that we will trust.' (CZ 14-15 B). Other interviewee added that when we meet someone new, we need to firstly consciously want to trust the other person, and only then can we further evaluate the relationship based on experience: 'It is true [as one of the interviewees says] that it is actually more a question of wanting to at the beginning. Whether we want to believe [in the context of trust] that person or not, and then it is the experience' (CZ 30+ A).

Therefore, absence (vacuum) of (dis)trust could be seen as a different phenomenon compared to a certain level (valence) of (dis)trust. In the absence of (dis)trust, there is no conscious (or desired) evaluation of the subject of (dis)trust. Subsequently, only when the person has a sufficient and conscious interest could the subject of (dis)trust be evaluated. However, the non-evaluation of the subjects of (dis)trust could also have a positive or negative impact on the person in some form.

Furthermore, when an evaluation happens, we can assume a certain level of (dis)trust. For example, one of the interviewees describes (dis)trust interconnection as a trust-distrust scale:

> *(...) that trust... It is not like I trust / I don't trust. It is more like a scale, I would say... Like, I would say here - I fully trust [pointing his finger all the way to the left on an imaginary scale], to I don't trust at all [pointing his finger at the other end of the scale]* (CZ 14-15 B).

Another interviewee subsequently added that he experienced (dis)trust more dichotomously: 'I had trust on and off' (CZ 14-15 B). Therefore, the way people characterise spectrum(s) of (dis)trust could differ individually. However, many interviewees still mentioned a certain level of (dis)trust in various ways.

One way in which the interviewees described the level of (dis)trust was by focusing on the higher level of (dis)trust and its consequences. The interviewees stated that both high trust or distrust could have negative consequences. Some interviewees even labelled high (dis)trust as 'blind.' For example, one of the interviewees said: '(...) that a lot of people who blindly trusted, like, um, are taking much more trauma from Covid, and even have other consequences' (CZ 18-19 A). Other interviewees further pointed out that high trust could limit a person's ability to make decisions independently: 'Ah, like, if you trust someone too much, then you will do exactly what someone wants. So, you become that person who... You cannot make decisions on your own' (CZ 11-12 A). Other interviewees also pointed out that by trusting more, we may renounce our own judgement and opinion: 'Why it is not good to trust, that, you know, then the person kind of renounces some kind of own opinion or judgement' (CZ 30+ A). Furthermore, other interviewees also pointed out that a certain level of distrust was healthy, and that a healthy level of distrust depended on the reasons for distrust: 'But there must be some healthy balance and a certain small amount of distrust, and possibly a greater one when the reasons for it [the distrust] emerge' (30+ CZ A). However, at the same time, another interviewee mentioned that initial distrust could sometimes lead to the initial rejection of a good opinion:

> *Uh... When you don't trust him, uh... then maybe you find out that it [trusting the politician] could have helped (...) somehow, you reject the idea from that politician... how it could be... Uh... maybe you [then] find out... how it could be, if that measure was implemented. It could have been better, and you only find out after... rejecting the opinion. So, in that case, it could be bad* (CZ 11-12 A).

Interviewees, therefore, consider it beneficial when people keep their own opinion, despite a certain level of (dis)trust, and potentially acquire additional information about the topic. The importance of being informed, having one's own opinion, and a reasonable level of (dis)trust in measures is summarised by one of the other interviewees:

> *(...) those people who don't trust... well... It doesn't have to be bad that they don't completely trust the government... but when they still follow it [the restrictions] somehow... but they also look for other articles. That maybe they don't just take news [as facts], but rather try to find out more about what Covid is, how it spreads, and so on. And they might even talk about it more. It's possible. In other words, they follow the rules but also, they find their own information as well* (CZ 14-15 A).

Therefore, interviewees do not evaluate the trust-distrust relationship only as a scale or spectrum, but trust and distrust could be evaluated simultaneously. As an ideal, there could be a simultaneous combination of both at certain ratios. As one of the

interviewees stated in the excerpt above, it is possible to trust to a certain extent and follow restrictions, while it is also distrusting to a certain extent. Many interviewees subsequently stated that it is desirable to rely to some extent on one's own opinion, which could be supported by independently obtained information. Subsequently, the interviewees linked the formation of their own opinion more strongly with moderate distrust. For example, as one of the interviewees says: 'It is like if a person is very smart or reasonable, and if the person did not trust as much. Then he would have his own perspective, which the one who trusts too much could lose' (CZ 11-12 B). However, at the same time, interviewees interpreted excessive distrust as potentially putting other people in society at risk. As one of the interviewees points out, blind distrust could endanger even people who are closest to them:

> Well, I think that if they don't trust the measures, then they must... they don't take... then they don't take such good care, and they could sometimes catch Covid and then go, say, to their grandparents and they could pass the Covid to them, and they may think it is just some [normal] illness, such as a cold. They may think it [Covid-19] is simply not that serious, and therefore, it can have a bad influence on their surroundings too, causing people to argue and such. Also, it could be really bad, even for the grandparents, as they could become seriously ill (CZ 14-15 A).

Interviewees, therefore, see a certain level of trust and distrust as compatible. There could be at the same time trust in the measures and restrictions that could lead to caution and a reduction in negative consequences for society, and a moderate healthy level of distrust, which could help to form one's own judgement from independently researched information. Therefore, both trust and distrust could, at these more moderate levels, be adaptive.

Therefore, these optimal moderate levels of trust and distrust are free from extreme, blindly held levels of trust or distrust, but also from a (dis)trust vacuum. The subject of (dis)trust needs to be firstly evaluated, and must not be ignored. Therefore, adequate interest, willingness, and sensitivity to the institutions and individuals, from interviewee's (dis)trust perspective, are key here. At the same time, it is similarly important for institutions to find adequate ways to communicate their decisions to the public, so that individuals can properly evaluate them. Therefore, the subject of (dis)trust must not be ignored, but at the same time, only a certain level of (dis)trust is considered optimal, according to interviewees. An optimal balance of moderate trust and distrust, free from extreme levels of either, could lead to the easier formation of one's own judgement, the seeking of additional information, openness to the views of others, as well as not missing opportunities and the ability to flexibly evaluate (dis)trust in various situations.

Age differences:

Some of the younger interviewees, under the age of 19, may have assessed their trust based on the opinions of their parents or other adults, and in some cases, their efforts

to form their own opinion may have been weaker. On the one hand, younger interviewees described a more direct influence of measures through school or friends, but they also described the mediated influence of measures and restrictions through other adults. Therefore, it could be assumed that adults could, to some extent, guide what is important for younger people. For example, not caring, or a lack of interest, may not be a direct reflection of the lack of interest in institutions and their measures, but a figurative lack of interest of parents or other adults. Despite this, the perceived importance of the creation of one's own opinion was very high and consistent across all age groups. Additionally, friendship was a significant factor in assessing (dis)trust towards other people or institutions, yet it remained consistent across age groups.

Furthermore, it appears that younger interviewees tended to label people or institutions as strictly good or strictly bad more frequently than their older counterparts. For example, younger interviewees discussed their trust in "good people" (14-15 CZ A) and their distrust of "bad people" (14-15 CZ B). These forms of labelling were largely absent among the oldest (30+) age groups. This observation may suggest that younger interviewees may be more inclined to engage in simplified and more dichotomous evaluations of trust or distrust. On the other hand, the oldest interviewees more frequently stated that a certain degree of distrust, particularly towards institutions, could be beneficial. However, they also acknowledged that this form of distrust does not prevent them from trusting the subject in other areas. Therefore, it can be assumed that the oldest interviewees may tend to conceptualise trust and distrust more as two interconnected, yet separate spectrums. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the distinction of viewing trust and distrust as non-exclusive spectrums was also present among younger groups, particularly among those aged 18-19 and 14-15. However, it was not, as was stressed among these age groups, as it was among the oldest interviewees.

Finally, a moderate level of (dis)trust was similarly important for each age group. In each group, interviewees mentioned blind (dis)trust as problematic. Also, interviewees in each group talked about the importance of one's own judgement, and the openness to the views of others. Nevertheless, as previously stated, it appears that the opinions of others may have a greater influence on the judgement of younger interviewees.

3.2. Theme 2: Generalisation of (dis)trust across contexts

The (dis)trust described by the interviewees could take various generalised forms. In this theme, we will address the fact that interviewees sometimes described **short-term contextually dependent (dis)trust** to specific situations, topics, institutions, and people, compared to a **long-term and more stable generalised (dis)trust**. In addition to that, interviewees described a reciprocal connection between these two forms of (dis)trust. Generalised (dis)trust could influence individuals' perception of specific events, but at the same time, the evaluation of these individual events shapes, and forms generalised (dis)trust. Interviewees described these **reciprocal connections as optimal**. In contrast, unchangeable or excessively stable generalised (dis)trust, or overly questioning or making hasty evaluations of individual situations, could lead to

negative consequences, according to the interviewees. Therefore, in addition to reciprocity, interviewees **also valued mutual permeability** (modifiability) between these two forms of (dis)trust.

One form of (dis)trust described by the interviewees was contextually dependent (dis)trust. Interviewees described multiple specific situations in which they evaluated (dis)trust. Whether it was (dis)trust in specific government measures or regulations, politics, or (dis)trust in friends and other close people in various life situations. One of the interviewees, for example, described that in his life, he has no one he trusts completely: 'I would probably say that I cannot generalise it. There are many people who have my trust, each in something different, and I don't know anyone who has my 100% trust' (CZ 30+ A). Therefore, the interviewee conditioned his trust towards other people on the specific context in which he would trust the person. Subsequently, the interviewee adds that, 'Yeah, when it comes to work, I have people who I absolutely trust in here. I have other people who I trust in terms of relationships, or I trust other people when it comes to finances' (CZ 30+ A). Similarly, another interviewee describes: 'And the thing is, I have trust in each of those people for some different reason' (CZ 14-15 B).

Furthermore, contextually dependent (dis)trust was also described by interviewees in relation to institutions, politicians, or experts. One of the interviewees, for example, states that he tried to listen to experts who were relevant to him in the context of the Covid-19 situation: '(...) I tried to listen to experts, whether from the field of medicine, epidemiology, or mathematics' (CZ 30+ B). However, many of the interviewees also described a different type of (dis)trust. One of the interviewees stated that gradually, based on bad experiences with politics, he formed a more generalised form of distrust:

> *Well, I didn't really trust them [the government] at all... because of those bad decisions, I actually haven't heard anything good from them. (…) So, I didn't trust them because... I didn't believe that they could make any good decisions when they made so many bad ones* (CZ 11-12 A).

Similar experience was then described by other interviewees. Some interviewees gradually lost their trust in politicians when they accumulated bad experiences with them. For example, one of the interviewees describes a series of smaller issues with politicians that could have led to a more stable distrust towards a broader range of politicians:

> *It all seems to me like... (...) Everyone just has some problems, and I am just tired of it. (...) And as far as... those... when it comes to Covid (...) It is hard to believe someone... like Mr. Prymula [One of the former health ministers], for example, who looked credible at the beginning and then started going to football games in restrictions and yeah... to [restaurant] or wherever. (...) So, it's hard to believe these people when they announce something or that they forbid something in good faith. You think that he's an expert, and then he goes somewhere for a party or makes some shady deals, non-transparent, and so on. (...) that's exactly the establishment of the fifteen years while I've been following politics here. So,*

it seems to me that it's like this always to a greater or lesser extent with any government that's in power. So, I am very sceptical about it [the politics] (CZ 30+ B).

Additionally, some interviewees indicated that specific government representatives were not as crucial as the overall image of the government. These interviewees tended to view the actions of the government in general, and no longer distinguished from particular officials:

Well, uhm... I meant to say that, for me personally, the trust wasn't really... like [one of the interviewees] *said - he said that he cared about who was in the minister's position. And I wasn't really focused on the names, but more on the [government as a] whole. Like how they behaved and what kind of regulations they made (CZ 18-19 B).*

Furthermore, another interviewee also noted that the distrust in the government that arose during the Covid-19 situation could potentially persist in the future, and importantly, could also spread outside of the Covid-19 context: 'If they give them [citizens] a reason not to trust, then in the future, when it makes them distrust, it could be a problem also in other situations, not just in Covid-19' (CZ 14-15 A).

As a result, it can be assumed that individual, shorter-term, contextually-specific experiences, in which interviewees evaluate (dis)trust towards people or institutions, could gradually become more generalised. Based on these experiences, people may develop a broader and longer-term (dis)trust towards people or institutions, reinforced by positive or negative experiences.

At the same time, however, generalised (dis)trust towards people or institutions, once it has been established, could also influence shorter-term, contextually-specific (dis)trust. Generalised (dis)trust could provide individuals with a basic anchor in the given situation, and this a priori tendency to trust or distrust subsequently could influence the perception of specific situations.

For example, one of the interviewees describes that people may have a tendency to (dis)trust others within their personal settings. This tendency could then influence other situations in which (dis)trust towards people or institutions might manifest:

I think it's not really a question of whom one trusts, but it's rather about personal settings of trust. As you said, we all have a slightly different personal setting [of trust]. So, when someone tends to distrust, they will not trust the government or other people either (CZ 18-19 B).

Furthermore, another interviewee also described her tendency to initially distrust, as it allows her to be pleasantly surprised later on: 'It's good... actually, it's better at the beginning not to trust rather than trust. In my opinion, it's better to be pleasantly surprised [laughter] rather than disappointed' (30+ CZ B). Therefore, the acquired experiences from individual situations could manifest as a longer-term tendency to (dis)trust in a certain situation, a person or an institution.

Finally, similar to the previous theme, interviewees described a certain level of both generalised and contextually-specific trust as optimal, and, more specifically, the modifiability and reciprocity between these two forms of (dis)trust. For example, one of the interviewees described that it could be ideal to slightly trust in general, but at the same time slightly distrust and clarify (dis)trust subsequently based on experience:

> *I would probably agree with [one of the interviewees]* that *we should trust in order to... for people to be united and if it doesn't work, then at least the government should have the basis for knowing whether it worked or not. And rejecting it from the beginning without knowing anything about it seems foolish to me* (CZ 18-19 B).

Therefore, it can primarily be considered negative when generalised (dis)trust is too stable, and individual contextual experiences are unable to modify the initial expectations. However, a certain level of stable generalised trust is necessary, as it allows us to function in a society. As one of the interviewees stated, it is necessary to 'get along with other people' (30+ CZ A), and one simply needs to have 'some close people and trust some of them' (30+ CZ A). Therefore, according to the interviewees, unmodifiable generalised distrust, or constantly questioning of everything, are also not the appropriate approaches.

Age differences:

Older interviewees (ages 30 and above) in some cases described having a more diverse range of life experiences, which they used to evaluate different situations from a perspective of trust or distrust. This could sometimes lead to a more complex evaluation of specific situations based on a more complex, generalised trust or distrust that has been shaped by experiences from various contexts.

For example, several older interviewees tended to manifest a higher tolerance for mistakes, which was not as prevalent among younger interviewees. Younger interviewees were more likely to speak about 'bad experiences' (14-15 CZ A) that had an impact on their evaluations of trust and distrust. In contrast, older interviewees acknowledged that everyone could make mistakes sometimes. As one interviewee stated: '(…) it is important whether it happens once or several times, and whether I feel any intention behind it. That many times, a person can make mistakes and do something, I don't know, make some mistakes, it can happen to anyone' (30+ CZ A). Additionally, younger interviewees had more difficulty in differentiating between different government institutions (such as ministers, parliament, senate, etc.). This may suggest that generalised (dis)trust in older age may not only be more stable with experiences, but also more complex, and that various experiences could help to add more nuance to evaluations of specific situations.

Additionally, younger interviewees could tend to simplify their evaluations, especially in situations where they do not have many experiences themselves. For example, when evaluating different government institutions, younger people may not find the distinction between the institutions as important and thus, their evaluations may be less detailed. As a result, younger interviewees may be more inclined to adopt a less complex

evaluation with the help of less developed generalised (dis)trust, especially in situations where they do not have enough experience to make a more differentiated decision.

3.3. Theme 3: The effects of positive and negative life experiences on (dis)trust

Positive or negative experiences had a substantial effect on (dis)trust. **The positive experiences of interviewees led to trust**, whether in the context of interpersonal relationships or of the government. On the other hand, betrayals, wounds, disappointments, or any other **negative experience led to distrust**. Likewise, the negative experiences with the government, such as the chaos, the dysfunctional measures, and others, were the reasons for distrust. Furthermore, it was not only personal experience that mattered, but **also the experiences of others**.

Several interviewees described a person they trusted as someone with whom they shared experiences, and in many situations, this person was there for them, supported them, or helped them (this is elaborated on more in the theme, Reciprocity). Many times, interviewees mentioned that they had known this person for a long time, and their experience was mainly positive. One interviewee (CZ 14-15 A) said she "tested" whether her friend was trustworthy, and after some critical occasions, she proved to be. Similarly, as described in the theme, Reciprocity, not only are positive experiences a reason to trust, but also when the experience is not negative; for example, the trusted person had never disappointed the interviewees, had not done anything to break the trust. On the contrary, another interviewee said: 'I'd say that the people I distrust… it's just because I don't know them. That I don't know what they're like. I don't have any experience with them, so I wouldn't confide in them at once' (CZ 14-15 B). For many interviewees, the experience of others mattered, too. In the case of trust, some interviewees trusted on the grounds of behaviour towards others, or not knowing anyone "who'd have a bad experience with her" (CZ 14-15 A).

Interviewees generally did not speak about positive experiences with the government, other institutions, or politicians. However, one interviewee highlighted the role of a positive experience: 'I think it was important (…) when it worked [the implemented measures]. When there was a positive experience, it boosted trust tremendously. And when it wasn't there, then everything [trust] was falling' (CZ 30 A). Another interviewee (CZ 11-12 A), too, thought that 'a good measure' improved trust.

Furthermore, throughout the focus groups, interviewees talked about disappointment and hurtful experiences. Several interviewees described how they distrusted someone after the person 'hurt' them (CZ 14-15 B), 'spread gossip' about them (CZ 14-15 B), 'revealed their secret' (14-15 A), or 'betrayed them' (CZ 11-12 A), 'several times disappointed them ["disappointed their trust"]' (CZ 30+ B). One said:

> *Well, for me, there is again the role of the experience. Simply it is someone that I don't have good experience with. I don't have a good experience that this person has done a few things that probably hurt me. (…) Simply, it's not someone*

that I'd come to and say what's worrying me. Because I know that she would be able to use it against me or something (CZ 18-19 B).

And someone else added:

Well, from my personal experience, I know that it doesn't pay off to trust any-one. As Sofie says, one wants to share something personal. To confide in some-one. And like this person uses it against you in the end. Maybe later, but still. So, unfortunately, I, too, have had an experience with this (CZ 18-19 B).

In these two segments, it can be seen that some interviewees distrusted certain people who had hurt them, but others were more distrustful in general. Several interviewees felt they were more careful and cautious after having a negative experience. Therefore, some perceived distrust as safer, and as something that can prevent people from being hurt.

For one interviewee, a bad experience was a reason to distrust, too. Besides other reasons, bad experiences with others were also mentioned:

For me, it was a bad experience, too. When I find out that (…) this person did something to me, or someone spread gossip about me. Maybe because he thought he would look somehow better. (…) or acted unfairly, for example, towards me. Or didn't keep something important that we agreed upon. Or I know that many people tell this about him from my surroundings. That they had this experience with him. Or when this person says things that don't make sense, or when he spreads unverified information or contradictory claims (CZ 30+ A).

Some other interviewees talked about a few people who acted poorly towards others, and therefore could not be trusted.

Likewise, the negative experience with the government caused interviewees' distrust. This is partially more elaborated on in 'The need for a predictable framework'. Chaos, changing measures, meaningless measures, broken promises, or bad decisions by pol-iticians strongly affected distrust. For example, one interviewee does not trust that the policymakers can make good decisions after all the bad ones. One interviewee pointed out that an experience with a particular politician mattered too: '[When people found out] that it suggested that politician, well it's obvious, it's going to be something bad' (CZ 11-12 A), or another interviewee distrusted the ex-prime minister, Andrej Babiš, because he had 'plenty, plenty of reasons why to dislike him' (CZ 30+ B), or another interviewee distrusted Babiš because of the way he repeatedly acted on TV. Another interviewee said: 'Also, when someone belongs to the group of politicians that you a priori distrust (…) you just wait for another scandal (…) you automatically distrust it [the measures suggested by this politician]' (CZ 30+ B). Not taking responsibility, or not apologising in the context of politics, were other factors contributing to distrust.

The personal experience with Covid played an important role in (dis)trust, too. Either having Covid: 'and the fact that I had Covid affected me a lot, too. Then I found out that it is real' (CZ 18-19 A), or: 'I didn't trust. Or I did, from the beginning, but then I

stopped trusting because of the testing, too. In fact, I tried it on myself. (…) I didn't trust the antigen testing because many times it turned out opposite' (CZ 18-19 A).

Just as in the previous sections, the experience of others had an impact on the interviewees. Whether it was a close person struggling because of the measures, or someone who ended up hospitalised or who died of Covid, one interviewee explained: 'When it was presented this way, we couldn't imagine whether it is a real problem or not until it touched some close people. And because it touched our closest, then we formed our own opinion' (CZ 18-19 A). Furthermore, many interviewees knew people who worked in hospitals, or at Covid centres, and were desperate that the government did not take the right actions, that it was 'incompetent' (CZ 18-19 A). This negative experience of others contributed to distrust. One interviewee mentioned vaccination and the fact that 'many people had unprecedented side effects [after the vaccination]' (CZ 18-19 A) which was a reason to distrust.

Lastly, the experience of other countries with Covid was influential for some interviewees, too. For example, one said:

> At first, I hoped they [the policymakers] knew what they were doing. Because I knew I couldn't do anything with it even if I wanted to. So, I simply trusted them. Probably because there was no other option. But then, with time, it changed a bit. Because when one saw how it was developing in other countries, so I compared it a lot, and I knew that our situation's not the best. During Covid. So, then it was like... then I was thinking a little bit about whether they really know what they're doing, and I was still hoping that they did... (CZ 18-19 B).

To conclude, the experience – either ours or of others – is very powerful in the context of (dis)trust. Interestingly, one interviewee pointed out that the experience of distrust towards the authorities during the Covid pandemic could spill over into 'other situations' (CZ 14-15 A). And another interviewee doubted that if there was a similar situation to the Covid pandemic, people would suddenly 'trust again' (CZ 14-15 B). From the data, it seemed that the experience was transferable, and that negative experiences are more stable – it might be harder to start trusting after distrusting than the other way around. On top of that, people watch the actions of others, and perceive their experiences, too.

Age differences:

For the older interviewees, the experience was something important for (dis)trusting. Many of them used the word 'experience' as an explanation for why they (dis)trusted (compared to the youngest group that did not use the word at all). When speaking of interpersonal relationships, the younger interviewees used phrases such as trusting the wrong person, while the others framed it more as having a bad experience with that person. The older interviewees (18+) talked about knowing people who had died of Covid, or who had worked at hospitals, watched the situation in other countries, too – and how it had affected their distrust.

3.4. Theme 4: The need for a predictable framework

Predictability – knowing what to expect – was integral to trust. Unpredictability, on the other hand, substantially undermined it. The unceasing unpredictability of the situation during the pandemic was a major source of distrust in policymakers and measures. Specifically, the everchanging restrictions, the number of candidates that held the post of health minister, chaotic communication, and more commonly appearing contradictory information elicited distrust. Seeing the hypocrisy of the policymakers as they were breaking their own rules further eroded the trust of the interviewees. Consistent opinions, following through on one's words, and genuineness rather than pretence increased trust in interpersonal relationships. Simultaneously, trust in a close person was viewed as a source of predictability, stability, and safety. **Predictability and trust thus reinforce each other**. Similarly, a basic level of trust in the government and others sets the ground for a predictable, well-functioning society.

Most interviewees identified the constant changes in measures as key sources of distrust towards the restrictions and their authors. They highlighted that the measures kept changing within a matter of weeks and often even days: 'They announced something and, for example, after two days, they took it back' (CZ 18-19 A). In addition to the frequent changes of the measures, most interviewees noted that 'the restrictions were communicated very chaotically' (CZ 30+ B). The chaotic communication further intensified distrust.

Several interviewees expressed understanding towards the everchanging rules and chaotic communication at the beginning of the pandemic, when we 'hardly knew anything about the virus" (CZ 11-12 B). However, they hoped the predictability of the situation would improve with time because they expected the government to draw on the experiences from the first Covid wave. In particular, they hoped for more precise planning of the measures and easily accessible, concise information about the currently valid restrictions. Disappointingly, the chaos did not decrease with time. To illustrate the 'unceasing cycle' (CZ 30+ B) of unpredictability, several interviewees compared the government's decision-making process to a lottery:

> *The restrictions here came out of nowhere. Really, I had seen a lot of jokes that corresponded to that. Such as that they spin the wheel, roll the dice, reach into a sack with random pieces of paper and decide what they will close, for how long and when they will open it. That's how chaotic the process seemed to me for a very long time. I don't mean just the first six months, but even the second, the third year seemed very, very similar to me* (CZ 30+ B).

Notably, the persisting chaos and confusion about what measures were valid undermined the trust even among interviewees who generally trusted the policymakers, and believed in the importance of the measures: 'I trusted them, but then when the confusion started (…) and nobody really knew what rule was actually valid, I didn't trust them from time to time due to the confusion' (CZ 14-15 A).

Not only did the predictability not improve, but the situation became even more challenging to navigate in some respects. Several interviewees noted that they stopped

trying to stay apace with what measures were valid towards the end of the pandemic, due to the increasing confusion: 'Towards the end, there was such a mess in what was in effect and what was not. In this respect, it [the communication from the government] went entirely downhill. I couldn't even be bothered to look it up' (CZ 14-15 B). Many interviewees mentioned that they started noticing increasing inconsistency between the strictness of the measures and the severity of the pandemic situation, which negatively affected their trust. While the measures were stringent during the first wave, when there were relatively few cases, the restrictions were considerably looser in the subsequent waves despite much high case numbers, with the government hesitant to employ more burdensome, unpopular measures:

> *In the beginning, there were few cases [of confirmed Covid-19]. I felt like they closed everything. They closed schools, they closed pubs. (…) Then there were a lot of cases [of confirmed Covid-19], but nothing closed. (…) They made a mess in it, I felt. It was sort of inconsistent. So that's why I did not trust them fully* (CZ 14-15 B).

The multiple changes of health ministers throughout the pandemic further fuelled the unpredictability of the situation. Consequentially, the frequent changes of health minister also increased distrust: 'As the health ministers kept changing, nobody knew what was going to happen, and what to expect. So that maybe also aroused distrust' (CZ 18-19 B). Not only did every health minister adopt a somewhat different position to tackle the pandemic, but there was a growing disunity among politicians, including government members. They started publicly declaring contradictory opinions on the measures, or even resorted to blaming one another. The opposing expert opinions that started emerging were perhaps even more concerning for the interviewees: 'The experts were very divided, as well. Some said yes, go get vaccinated and wear the masks. Others said no, it is pointless' (CZ 30+ A).

Beyond the growing diversity of opinions on the measures, many interviewees were highly critical of the hypocrisy of some politicians and epidemiologists. There were several instances when the policymakers were caught breaching the regulations they created, imposed, and advocated:

> *(…) They didn't adhere to some of the measures themselves. So, if they were supposed to be knowledgeable, and they were giving us instructions what to do, but they didn't abide by them themselves, why should I? That's when I was completely losing trust in the government* (CZ 18-19 A).

The changing measures, changing health ministers, chaotic communication, omnipresent contradictory information, and the disappointing incidents of hypocrisy from the policymakers led the interviewees to conclude that people did not know 'what to believe' (CZ 14-15 A), 'whom to trust' (CZ 30+ A), and 'what to do at all' (CZ 18-19 B).

Predictability appeared to be an essential source of trust in interpersonal relationships, as well: 'I find the word predictability is very important in trust. Even towards people. When I can predict how the person will act, and it's in accordance with my values, then

I can trust them' (CZ 30+ B). A couple of interviewees described that a person with a generally stable nature makes it easier to know what to expect from them:

> *In order to trust someone, it's very important to me that the person be stable. (…) When something keeps changing all the time, I must get used to new things. I don't know what to believe. I don't know what will happen* (CZ 18-19 B).

Other cornerstones of predictability when trusting others were consistency in opinions and statements over time. Some participants highlighted the importance of the lack of inconsistency between the information provided by the person and others: 'This contradictory information – not only from the person, but from other people, as well. You know, finding out that what the person told me was not completely true' (CZ 30+ A).

Most interviewees emphasised the congruence between words and actions as necessary when trusting someone, whereas hypocrisy was a source of distrust. Following through on important promises was deemed a sign of predictability and trustworthiness. General incongruence between the person's proclaimed attitudes and their behaviour was a strong reason for disappointment, resulting in distrust: 'If the person keeps claiming for a long time that they would never do something and then they actually do it. (…) Their behaviour disappoints you' (CZ 14-15 A). Feigning friendship or affection towards someone only to eventually betray the person was particularly damaging to trust:

> *(…) A person who sort of… seems all smiles but then like backstabs me, yeah. This has happened to me multiple times, that the person is sort of keeping up the pretence in front of you that they're your biggest friend, and then they really double-cross you in the situation. Or in a situation when you least expect it* (CZ 30+ B).

Several interviewees noted that trust fulfils the need for stability, and enables us to 'feel certainty and safety' (CZ 18-19 A). Predictability and trust were thus perceived as reciprocal by the interviewees. Predictability and consistency can serve as building blocks of trust. At the same time, trust provides stability, predictability, and safety once established. In contrast, distrust can be exhausting. It can also serve as a source of insecurity, as 'one must constantly be on one's guard, and it is a very negative way of life' (CZ 18-19 B).

At the society-wide level, several interviewees noted that a certain level of trust towards the government, and generally towards others, is necessary for a stable, predictable, and well-functioning society:

> *Trust really makes life a lot simpler and easier for us in the sense that I can go out in the street, and I can trust that no one will kill me, most likely, and I trust that if I get sick, I will get treatment in a hospital. I trust my employer that he will send me my salary. The employer, in turn, trusts me that I will do my work. Thanks to that, we can better plan our lives and focus on important things* (CZ 30+ B).

On the other hand, prevailing distrust towards the government and the policymakers could 'result in complete chaos' (CZ 14-15 A).

Age differences:

Regarding age differences, the younger interviewees (11-15) did not mention trust as a source of predictability, safety, and stability in interpersonal relationships. The youngest focus groups were the only ones that did not elaborate on the society-wide impact of trust and distrust. All age groups discussed the importance of predictability as a source of trust towards the government and people close to them.

3.5. Theme 5: The quest for meaning – Well-founded measures and well-acquainted people

When trying to make sense of the pandemic, the interviewees found the **meaningfulness of the measures** crucial. The interviewees considered some measures meaningless, especially if they seemed illogical, unnecessarily strict, ineffective and, most importantly, insufficiently explained by the government. The lack of rationale behind the majority of the implemented restrictions was upsetting. It discouraged the interviewees from adhering to the rules that seemed the most pointless to them. Expertise was generally held in high regard by the interviewees. There was a call for the government to base the measures and their timing even more diligently on **expert judgements**. On the other hand, the interviewees criticised the presumed influence of public opinion and conflicts of interest on whether some measures came into effect. To figure out what measures made sense to them, the interviewees themselves searched for and relied primarily on expert opinions, particularly epidemiologists' statements. The theme mainly covers trust and distrust in the government and the policymakers. However, knowledgeable people were generally considered more trustworthy than people who appeared not to know what they were talking about, even in interpersonal relationships. Expertise was also valuable when trusting people in professional contexts.

Most interviewees agreed that numerous measures were illogical, meaningless, and contradicted common sense: 'Some of the measures seemed very nonsensical. For example, when you were sitting, you didn't have to wear a mask, and so on. That was sort of stupid' (CZ 14-15 B). The meaninglessness greatly bothered the interviewees. It was also difficult for them to understand why the government imposed such measures: 'We didn't have to wear a mask [in class], but we couldn't sing [during music classes]. I did not understand this' (CZ 11-12 A). Many interviewees also considered some rules pointless due to being unnecessarily strict: 'It seemed silly to me to wear masks outside. It seemed absolutely unnecessary to me in the open space' (CZ 18-19 A). Some measures came with a high cost of being very restrictive for the interviewees, and little benefit regarding their impact on improving the pandemic situation. The perceived ineffectiveness of some of the strictest measures increased the impression that these measures lacked meaning: 'Even though there were some measures, the numbers [of confirmed Covid-19 cases] kept rising. Despite relatively strict measures, they kept increasing. So, many people did not see the point' (CZ 14-15 B).

The lack of rationale for the measures provided by the government exacerbated the perceived meaninglessness of some of the restrictions. Many interviewees noted that while the government focused on creating the measures and announcing them, they did not pay sufficient attention to explaining the facts and reasoning behind the restrictions: 'Maybe it would have been helpful to focus not on what they were ordering us to do, but on the facts' (CZ 30+ B). They felt that the government 'could have explained things better – for example, how the vaccine works' (CZ 18-19 B). Accompanying the announcements with an evidence-based explanation of the measures could have increased the perceived meaningfulness of the restrictions. As a result, people would be more willing to follow them 'because it would make sense, how they were explaining it' (CZ 30 + B). For many interviewees, the lack of meaning and insufficient explanations proved to be strong reasons for breaking the rules. They experienced an uncomfortable dissonance between wanting to abide by the measures to help improve the pandemic situation, and the measures not making sense to them:

> *Of course, I follow the rules, but at the same time, there was a clash with common sense about whether it was actually worth it. I must admit that I broke many rules because they simply did not seem logical* (CZ 18-19 A).

Some interviewees added that they did not have an issue with following and trusting the measures that the government adequately explained, but most of the measures lacked a meaningful explanation:

> *It was not explained. They gave us an explanation for the [cancelled] Christmas markets – we don't want you to travel to the city, and so on. Therefore, I understood that. However, there was an array of totally stupid measures that literally did not make sense. That was what one could not handle. It was not explained, which was a problem* (CZ 30+ A).

According to the interviewees, other motives that the government could hardly openly explain affected what measures came into effect. Several interviewees mentioned the conflicts of interest of some politicians, including a few health ministers. The fact that the government members, or people close to them, were involved in businesses directly profiting from the pandemic, such as Covid-19 testing, significantly undermined the interviewees' trust. Rather than focusing on imposing effective, well-explained and well-founded measures, 'some of the government members did it for themselves, for their own money' (CZ 11-12 A). A few interviewees remarked that the populist government closely followed the public opinion polls, especially before the upcoming elections. The willingness of the government to withhold or withdraw some of the restrictions, so as not to upset the voters, hindered the effective and reasonable implementation of measures: 'If they had paid less attention to the PR and more to what was really needed, they could have implemented the measures sooner, and they would not have had to be as long and radical' (CZ 30+ A).

Several interviewees expressed hope and belief that the policymakers, nonetheless, based the measures primarily on 'expert recommendations' (CZ 14-15 B). However, some interviewees noted that the government did not always consult the experts, and

did not listen to the experts in time on a number of occasions. The expert predictions that went unheard materialised later on. The government then had to adopt strict measures, even though milder but timely restrictions may have sufficed:

> *What somewhat decreased my trust was when I saw one of the experts, an epidemiologist presenting the opinion that it was spreading, and we needed to act immediately. Even multiple experts claimed that. However, nothing happened. Then suddenly, a few weeks later, the government started imposing lockdowns, and it [Covid] really started spreading very unpleasantly. At that moment, I was thinking, couldn't they have consulted with the experts sooner and couldn't they have forestalled this? When there were evidently people who could predict this, why did the government not consult them? Or where were these people when they were thinking up the measures?* (CZ 30+ B).

The interviewees perceived expertise as highly important when deciding on whom to trust about the pandemic situation – when trying to make sense of the situation themselves, most interviewees tried to 'listen to the experts' (CZ 30+ B). They generally trusted the experts in relevant fields such as medicine, natural sciences, and mathematical modelling. Several interviewees mentioned epidemiologists as the experts they trusted and relied on the most because 'the topic was closest to them, and they knew best what to do' (CZ 14-15 A). However, a few interviewees trusted experts who were spreading disinformation about Covid-19, despite their education and relatively successful careers in medicine and natural sciences. They viewed them as the independent voice of reason that was 'not part of the mainstream' (CZ 30+ A). A couple of participants mentioned they did not just trust the experts, but also science and the data, in general: 'I trusted science and the things that were, in my opinion, scientifically based' (CZ 30+ A).

For some of the interviewees, the expertise of the health minister was also highly important. They pondered that some health ministers were markedly more well-acquainted with epidemiology than others. The interviewees perceived the background in epidemiology as an asset: 'There were health ministers who were literally epidemiologists, which seemed crucial for the situation, in my opinion – that they knew how the pandemic behaves' (CZ 18-19 B).

More generally, the interviewees tended to trust people who are knowledgeable about a topic, and correspondingly did not trust 'people who do not know what they are talking about' (CZ 11-12 B). Several interviewees mentioned the ability to support one's opinions with well-reasoned arguments as having contributed to their trust in people they knew in person: 'I think she is intelligent, smart, and has reasons for her opinions' (CZ 14-15 B). For some interviewees, perceived expertise primarily increased their trust in people in more formal contexts. For example, they were more likely to trust colleagues or service providers who appeared competent in their eyes.

Age differences:

The 11-12 focus groups did not discuss whether the effectiveness of the measures in reducing the incidence of Covid-19 made the measures more meaningful in their eyes.

In addition, they did not elaborate on the importance of experts and expert opinion beyond noting that the policymakers were older and more experienced than them. They did, however, notice that the government did not explain the measures very well, and that some of the measures did not make sense.

3.6. Theme 6: Reciprocity

Among the focus groups, the interviewees mentioned reciprocity of trust in interpersonal relationships. **For many, it is important that trust is mutual**, as is helping each other, sharing, doing something together, or having the same values. Equally vital are the actions and behaviour of the others. This theme mainly describes trust in interpersonal relationships.

Several interviewees trusted someone because they were trusted, too. A few interviewees emphasised that they trusted someone because 'we trust each other a lot' (CZ 14-15 A), or some interviewees called it 'mutual trust' (CZ 14-15 A, CZ 18-19 A). One interviewee (CZ 18-19 A) said if the trust was mutual, then there were no negative aspects to it (compared to when one trusted someone they did not know – which could be dangerous). Interestingly, according to one interviewee, mutual trust had its benefits: 'It is a win-win situation for both sides [to trust]. There is something positive for both of us. (…) both of us win. I get something; he gets something.' Similarly, with distrust, another interviewee (CZ 11-12 A) described that he distrusted someone because 'we don't like each other' – again, there is reciprocity, something mutual. Another (CZ 11-12 A) said: 'You distrust him, and he can tell. So, he will not trust you when you didn't trust him from the beginning.'

When interviewees were speaking about people they trusted, they often emphasised that they helped each other out, shared secrets, had something in common, did something together, etc. They often spoke in the plural; the actions of trust were mutual. The younger interviewees (11-15) talked about revealing secrets to each other.[1] As one said: 'She [her friend whom she trusts] knows many [of my] secrets, and I know hers' (CZ 14-15 A). Another (CZ 30 A) spoke of openness: 'I can openly share, and he can openly share, and it is about giving that space and time.' Or another interviewee pointed out: 'We are not afraid to share a secret that even our parents don't know about (…) when we need something, we're not afraid to ask for it and help each other' (CZ 11-12 A). Similarly, one interviewee described a person she trusted because they shared secrets and helped each other to solve them: 'I personally trust her because she confided in me, too, and together we try to solve our secrets [meaning solving problems they share]' (CZ 14-15 A). Other interviewees spoke of mutual help, too, and how in challenging situations, they 'helped each other out [with the person they trust]' (CZ 14-15 B). For example, one said:

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[1] The younger interviewees (11-15) spoke of sharing secrets, and it often seems that trusting means sharing secrets for this age group.

When you confide in someone who's going through the same, then you can help each other out, you can support each other, and it's good when you know that you have someone here who's going through the same, and you're actually in this together (CZ 14-15 A).

Mutual help was important for older interviewees, as well. For example, one interviewee (CZ 30 B) described how either he or his friend could come to the other when they needed help, and were always able to solve it together. Or another said: 'He helped me when I needed it. And the other way, when he came to me, I helped him' (CZ 30 A).

Another aspect of reciprocity as an integral part of trust is having something in common, or doing something together. Interviewees spoke of having similar goals, values, and interests; one interviewee mentioned 'mutual respect' as the reason for trust (CZ 30 B). Another interviewee trusted someone because:

For me, it's because of some common interest. That means we expect something, it turns out somehow, and we believe it will turn out that way. That we trust one another, we trust that what we do has a common goal (…) we know that we want something, and therefore we aim for that (CZ 30 A).

One interviewee said he trusted a friend because:

We have the same values, same values in a certain sense...certain sense of honour, a certain attitude to honesty, to feedback. The way we handle it. (…) And just as I somehow motivate him to move forward, he motivates me. That means he has feedback for me that I welcome and want from him. Or better said, he gives me something I want from him. So, the trust is based on…we really see things in the same way (CZ 30 A).

Some other interviewees mentioned the importance of feedback, too. Once again, trust in interpersonal relationships is not one-sided, but the interviewees perceive it as something mutual. Similarly, when the interviewees spoke of why they trusted someone, they often mentioned some action or activity from the other person. For example, as stated above, when one interviewee described why she trusted her friend, she said: 'Because she confided in me, too.' (CZ 14-15 A) Apparently, for some people, the reciprocity, or an active role of the other, is crucial for trust building. Interviewees described how the person they trusted was there for them, that 'he has never betrayed me' (CZ 30 A), 'he has never let me down, and that actually makes me trust him a lot' (CZ 14-15 B), '[the person this interviewee trusts] has never done something that would break that trust, or take it from me (…) everything we do for each other, we mean well' (CZ 18-19 B). Furthermore, the trusted person took the interviewees' side, and was not susceptible to what others said. For example, another interviewee said: 'I trust him because he didn't believe what the other person said about me. (…) He's always on my side and trusts me' (CZ 14-15 B). One interviewee described a conflict he had with someone. He pointed out that the person he trusts took no side, and supported both him and the other person, which he found commendable:

He told me that if someone spoke badly about me, he wouldn't be susceptible to the other source about me. And I feel the same way about him. I will not be influenced by anyone, no matter what their opinion [about the person the interviewee trusts] is (CZ 14-15 B).

On the other hand, interviewees perceived that an act of betrayal or hurt caused distrust. One interviewee said:

I distrust him because he lost my trust. And he lost it because he hurt me. He did things knowing he would hurt me [by doing them]. He did them anyways. (…) He didn't show me that he would care to gain my trust back. Simply, he lost it, and he didn't want to gain it back. So, I did not give him the trust back (CZ 18-19 A).

Needless to say, for many interviewees, it is important how the other person behaves; interviewees perceive the actions and attitudes of the other. And when it comes to interpersonal relationships, it takes two to trust.

Age differences:

There were no significant differences between the age groups, with the younger interviewees speaking more of sharing and revealing secrets.

3.7. Residual themes

(Dis)unity in society was a potential theme that we did not include in the final set of themes. A set of codes omitted from the analysis covered the perceived societal divide between those who trusted the government, and followed the measures, and those who did not. Several interviewees noted that Czech society became more divided due to the Covid-19 pandemic: 'Yes, some people trusted [the measures], some didn't trust. I would say there were only these two [opposing] camps, really. Either yes, or no, yeah. And... and they were fighting against each other a lot, and I think they still fight even now, actually' (CZ 30+ B). A few interviewees believed that some measures could have been more effective if Czech society had been united, and if most people had followed the measures: 'When people trust a lot, as [another interviewee] said, they will adhere to them [the measures] more, and maybe if we all really properly stuck to them [the measures] for a while, Covid wouldn't have spread so much' (CZ 11-12 B). (Dis)trust could thus serve both as a societal glue and a societal divide. There were, however, not enough codes to form a stand-alone theme.

As the research questions pertained to meanings and sources of (dis)trust, we did not cover loneliness and social isolation as negative consequences and losses tied with distrust. Several interviewees noted that general distrust could come at a great cost of loneliness and social isolation: 'I would say that the loss for me, for example, I mean regarding distrust, lies in a certain amount of isolation. That the more distrustful you are, the more isolated you become' (CZ 30+ A).

We also omitted a few isolated codes about (dis)trust in vaccines. These codes represented mostly the interviewees' expression of their general stance towards vaccination, and did not fit any of the existing themes.

Finally, we did not include a large set of codes capturing the interviewees' experiences with how the Covid-19 pandemic affected their day-to-day lives. The interviewees discussed how the pandemic and the restrictions impacted virtually all aspects of their lives, requiring them to adjust to an unprecedented situation. They described how they adapted to online schooling, working from home, or school/work with measures. They also talked about how the restrictions impacted their families and social lives, especially leisure activities and relationships with friends. While most interviewees listed the negatives, several interviewees also identified the positives, such as making use of the situation to pursue new hobbies.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. Meanings and sources of trust

Based on the evidence from the data, we constructed six themes relevant to how interviewees conceptualise trust and its sources. The themes, *Boundaries of moderate dis(trust)* and *Generalisation of (dis)trust across contexts* capture, in the first place, different forms and structures of people's trust or distrust. At the same time, the remaining themes – *The effects of positive and negative life experiences on (dis)trust*, *The need for a predictable framework*, *The quest for meaning – well-founded measures and well-acquainted people*, and finally *Reciprocity* – refer mainly to the processes through which trust and distrust grow or deteriorate.

With respect to specific meanings of trust, our results show that the very nature of trust can be considerably **different between individuals**. In the social sciences, there is a long tradition of debates on the proper conceptualisation of trust. These debates involve questions such as whether we should presume that people have different levels of trust (i.e., trust is a continuum), or that they simply do or do not trust (i.e., trust is a dichotomy), whether trust and distrust represent two separate dimensions, or opposing poles of the same dimension, or what forms can the absence of trust take (e.g., distrust versus ignorance). All these issues were also spontaneously discussed by our interviewees. In general, there did not seem to be a common conceptualisation of trust shared by all interviewees. For example, some individuals understood trust as a mere absence of negative experiences, or reasons to distrust, while others understood the same state as not caring, rather than trusting. Likewise, some interviewees believed that a balance or moderate position between trusting and distrusting represented an optimal level of trust, while others understood trust as something that was either "on" or "off". Thus, our findings imply that rather than looking for the most adequate conceptualisation of (dis)trust, which would be generally applicable, researchers should acknowledge the diversity of individual conceptualisations. From a more general perspective, this would mean replacing the variable-oriented approach to trust with the

person-oriented approach, focusing on individual patterns or profiles instead (e.g., von Eye & Bogat, 2006).

In both institutional and interpersonal domains and across multiple themes, interviewees often interpreted their trust (or distrust) as an outcome of careful deliberation, informed evaluation, and intentional decision making. Hence, they put considerably greater emphasis on the **rational nature of their (dis)trusting attitudes**, compared to the intuitive or affective sides. In the same manner, interviewees often criticised extremely strong forms of trust or distrust as "blind", referring to their presumed irrationality, inaccuracy, and vulnerability to bias. The preferred form of trust was conceptualised as informed, cautious, and critical, yet not overly critical. These findings suggest the widespread presence of a normative view, according to which trust should be primarily rational, while non-rationally-based trust is perceived as inferior. However, it should be noted that this finding applies to the *normative views* of interviewees on trust, not the *actual processes* through which their trust is formed.

In addition, interviewees' accounts of trust or distrust in domains often took a **narrative form**. This means that people conceptualised trust not as something static or given, but rather as a process characterised by a certain storyline. These stories involved moments such as gradual trust building, disillusionment, betrayal, or restoration. They also involved the idea of some initial expectations (e.g., a priori generalised trust) that had been confronted with actual experiences and supported, shaped, or overturned by them. Consistent with the above-mentioned preference for the rational view of trust, interviewees' "trust stories" tended to be coherent and meaningful. The idea of the narrative nature of trust is similar to the narrative approach to personal identity (McAdams et al., 2013). According to this approach, people are storytellers who actively construct narratives about their lives, giving their life stories a sense of coherence and purpose, which might have important consequences for adaptation and well-being. Our results suggest that trust in other people or institutions can also be represented as a complex narrative, rather than a simple assessment or expectation. The simple assessment or expectation can be expected only when the narrative has not been formed because of lack of experience, the novelty of the situation, etc. An intriguing task for future research could lie in the comprehensive classification of different trust narratives, and the examination of their links to well-being.

Particularly in the interpersonal domain, interviewees often tended to conceptualise **trust as a relationship**, which was apparent mainly from the sixth theme. Trust was not seen as a mere "picture in the head", that is, a one-sided assessment or expectation regarding the other person. Instead, it was approached as a complex interpersonal phenomenon, in which trust of person A to person B cannot be considered without taking into account reciprocal trust of person B to person A. The third theme further suggests that trust between two people develops through a common history, during which both positive and negative experiences with each other accumulate and shape the mutual relationship. The issues of similarity, compatibility, but also reciprocity, or responsiveness, seem to be relevant for the development of trust.

Not surprisingly, the relational nature of trust was less evident in the institutional domain. When discussing their sources of trust in this domain, our interviewees instead referred to the roles of three interrelated attributes of how authorities decide and affect people's daily lives. These attributes were **predictability, soundness, and the absence of negative experiences**. Therefore, to generate trust, the authorities first have to provide people with a predictable framework for their decision-making, allowing people to anticipate what decisions will be taken and when, and to prepare in advance. The opposite of the first attribute is the chaotic and unpredictable behaviour of the authorities. Second, people expect the decision-making outcomes to be sound, which means reasonable, coherent, and grounded in expert knowledge. At the same time, the measures must not only be justifiable, but also actually justified and explained to the public. Finally, people are sensitive to the signs of negative acts such as betrayal, unkept promises, or breaking rules by authorities. Interestingly, positive experiences with authorities, such as keeping promises or following rules, are rarely mentioned or considered. Although not explicitly expressed by our interviewees, these attributes altogether refer to the fulfilment of basic needs in the existential (security), epistemic (certainty) and relational (meaningful relationships) areas, presumed, for instance, by the system justification theory (Jost, 2019).

4.2. Trust from the developmental perspective: Towards a greater complexity and autonomy through various life experiences

The subtheme of age differences allows us to formulate several preliminary hypotheses, or expectations, that can be tested by future research. One area focuses primarily on the **cognitive aspects** of trust, and can be linked to the processes of cognitive maturation towards greater complexity, abstractness, and tolerance of ambiguity from childhood to adulthood. First, based on the narrative view of trust, adult narratives appear to be **more complex and nuanced** compared to the narratives of children and adolescents, which are rather simple, static, and lacking references to specific life experiences. Second, adults seem to be able to differentiate more clearly than children and adolescents **between trust and distrust**, and to conceive of them as two separate dimensions. Third, in a similar manner, adults are more aware of the distinction **between generalised trust, and trust in specific situations and towards specific people**. This means that adults can use their generalised trust in a more sophisticated way, applying their generalised trust when deliberately thinking about specific people and situations. In contrast, younger people are more willing to rely on their generalised trust even when it can lead to more simplified assessments of the situations. Fourth, children and adolescents seem to have a greater tendency towards **essentialist reasoning**, which can be seen in the tendency to argue that they do/do not trust somebody because he or she is a good/bad person. Adults are typically more reluctant to associate their trust or distrust with a more generalised moral assessment of the person. Instead, they usually take a longer time perspective, consider specific experiences with the person or institution (both positive and negative), are open to alternative and situational explanations of negative experiences, show a greater

tolerance for occasional missteps, and, in turn, their approach allows for a considerable degree of ambivalence.

Furthermore, there seems to be a growing wish for **autonomy** when forming trusting or distrusting attitudes. According to our findings, children and adolescents more often rely on their **significant others** (e.g., parents or other close adults) when forming their trust or distrust, especially if they identify others as more competent or experienced. This illustrates the assumption that, for children, parents and families serve as a buffer against the risks associated with the pandemic (Prime et al., 2020). Adults put an emhpasis on their autonomous trust assesment. This does not mean a tendency to completely refuse the views of others (for example, expert views can be highly regarded in some contexts), but rather a desire to make one's own assessment of the information and opinions collected.

Finally, some differences can be observed in how children, adolescents, and adults think about the above-mentioned sources of institutional trust. Although predictability, soundness, and absence of negative experiences were spontaneously mentioned in all age categories, children and adolescents pointed out the **predictability and soundness of the measures**, adopted by the authorities, to a lesser degree compared to adults. This might reflect the fact that adults experienced the anti-pandemic measures more directly, and in more life domains (e.g., occupationally), and were more concerned with the long-term consequences compared to younger people. The youngest interviewees also appeared less sophisticated when assessing the soundness of the measures in terms of their support by expert knowledge. Specifically, they perceived experts as a rather homogeneous category, paying less attention to the possibility that the levels and areas of expertise might differ between individuals. Moreover, they often assumed a naïve connection between being an expert and being experienced.

4.3. Limitations and future directions

When creating the themes, we were surprised by the high number of similarities that could be observed across all age groups, from children to adolescents to adults. Although several hypotheses on possible age differences (variations) are formulated in the previous subchapter, it must be kept in mind that these differences are usually a matter of degree and cannot be understood to be *qualitative*. For example, while adults often stressed the value of forming one's own opinion, children and adolescents did the same, although perhaps in less pronounced and more abstract ways.

An important limitation of our results is given directly by our method. Because we asked our interviewees *to talk* about trust, it is possible that this setting encouraged them to focus mainly on its cognitive, rational, and intellectual aspects. As mentioned above, the results probably underestimate the emotional or intuitional dimension of trust, which could also be relevant.

Another limitation comes from the composition of our sample. Our interviewees were *a priori* those who wanted to talk about their trust, and thus, it is likely that we were not able to capture some codes and themes related to not caring about institutions, high levels of distrust, or even conspiracy views on the institutions. At the same time, our data collection was carried out mainly during the summer holidays, so the children and adolescents involved in our study had to be highly motivated to talk and share their opinions on the topics studied.

Future studies could benefit from using different methods to corroborate our findings. One possibility is to focus on trust, its changes, and the predictors of these changes over a longer period of time. This can be done both qualitatively (e.g., using ethnography) and quantitatively (e.g., using an intensive longitudinal data collection capturing deviations between multiple time intervals). Furthermore, it would be intriguing to study factors affecting trust through experimental research designs. Other important topics for future research are the phenomena identified by our research, such as the absence of trust (i.e., people do not care about institutions, and do not have corresponding beliefs and attitudes), or the dichotomous forms of trust (i.e., people simply do or do not trust). Future research could also pay greater attention to trust in vulnerable populations that were not adequately represented in our study, such as socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Finally, the theme of reciprocity, related primarily to interpersonal trust in our results, could also be applied to the institutional domain. Therefore, we could ask not only whether people trust or distrust institutions, but also whether people think that institutions (dis)trust ordinary citizens, and how this perception, in turn, reciprocally shapes citizens' trust in institutions.

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4. Different Age Group Perspectives on (Dis)Trust during the Pandemic – Notions from Denmark

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1. Introduction

The report is a result of teamwork between the responsible researcher and writer of this report Anne Brus, Frederik Sand Madsen (FSM), Maria Hjulmand Wiberg, and Julie Hviidsten. FSM and Wiberg have supported the research process up until the report writing.

1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic in Denmark from 2020 to 2022

In this introductory part, we will present some short information about the Covid-19 pandemic development, waves, and measurements initiated by the Danish government. The introduction is divided into two parts; one with an overview of the anti-pandemic measure initiatives, and one with a special focus on Covid-19, and on the controversial order to destroy all mink in Denmark, colloquially known as the Danish Mink Scandal, or the Danish Mink Case, depending on how strongly the citizens feel about the illegal order. In this report, we will conceptualise it as the Mink Case.

1.2 The development of Covid-19 measurements

In the Danish context, the development of the pandemic measured by instances can be described in three waves.[2] The first wave started with the first Dane who tested positive in late February; it ends soon after in April 2020. The second wave lasted from November 2020 to January 2021, while the third wave was from March 2021 to April 2021. Although the test strategies are different from country to country, the death rate[3] indicates that Denmark coped well compared with many other European countries with a low number of deaths, especially during the third wave. Throughout the whole period, the Danes consented to the government's measurements (Nielsen et.al., 2022), even though especially the vaccines and the restrictions on gathering were met

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[2] https://coronasmitte.dk/viden-om-covid-19/artikler/2021/april/den-tredje-boelge-af-covid-19-i-europa.

[3] According to the official numbers, 8.362 Danes died because of Covid-19 (see https://sst.dk/da/corona/Status-og-materiale/Coronatal)

with resistance from a small group of citizens, especially among the youngest age groups and low-skilled workers[4] (Lindholt & Petersen, 2021).

From the very start of the pandemic, the Danish Health Authority (DHA) increased their efforts to communicate information about Covid-19, and to encourage citizens to follow the measurements towards the new disease. In late January 2020, the first information guidelines were published e.g., for the healthcare system's handling of patients, who were suspected of being infected with Covid-19, and recommendations for travellers (quarantine). As in many other countries, the DHA communicated much of their information to the citizens via their official websites, but other communication strategies to supplement the "top-down" communication with a more reciprocal dialogue orientation were used (Madvig et al., 2022). For example, the social media platform, Facebook, was an important place for dialogue, both to announce new initiatives from the DHA and to engage with citizens' questions.

The first registered Covid-19 infected Dane was registered in late February. Soon after, the 6th of March 2020, the Danish Prime Minister (PM), Mette Frederiksen, held the first of many press conferences where she informed Danes about the government's different initiatives towards the virus. During the second press conference on the 11th of March, the PM announced a national lockdown. Denmark was thus one of the first countries to react to the health threat. Public employees were sent home and schools, institutions, and day-care centres were closed. In the following days and weeks, the PM continued to hold news conferences to make new announcements about the handling of Covid-19 e.g., postponement or cancellation of events, setting limits on meetings with more than 10 people, recommendations to avoid shaking hands and hugging, isolation of infected patients, border closure, priority of Covid-19 patients in hospital beds, financial aid packages for small, medium-sized and large companies, announcement of changes in test strategies, etc.

At the beginning of April 2020, almost 6,000 Danes had tested positive with Covid-19, and in late April, 540 people were dead because of the virus. Despite this, the government expected that the development of the disease was under control. Over the next couple of months, several plans for reopening society were announced and unfolded. The first plan included children up to "5. Klasse" (primary school), but the re-opening was under certain conditions. For example, the authorities recommended that schools minimised physical contact between the children, ensured good sanitation, and limited the children's interaction with each other; and the classroom tables had to be arranged at distances of two metres from each other. The court of justice, and some liberal professions were also re-opened. Limits on gatherings were maintained. The activities in the health system were increased. The lower secondary schools, museums, cinemas, upper secondary schools, leisure activities were opened in the second phase, but the re-opening did not include university students. The test strategy was expanded e.g., testing everyone with Covid-19 symptoms and tracking down people that had been in

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[4]https://raw.githubusercontent.com/mariefly/HOPE/master/Aldersforskelle_i_danskernes_vaccinationsvillighed_20210701.pdf

contact with Covid-19 infected persons. In the same period, a restricted re-opening of the borders and an easing of the limits on gathering were carried through, as well.

In late July 2020, there were new signs of an increased infection in society. The DHA recommended people used masks on the public transport if there were many passengers gathered in the same place. The mask strategy was expanded in August so all passengers over 12 years old had to wear masks on the public transport. In late October 2020, the mask requirement was extended to include cinemas, shops, and youth education.

In mid-September 2020, the limits on gatherings were lowered from 100 to 50. Other restrictions were turned towards restaurants, bars, etc. They had to close at 10PM and it was demanded that people wear masks if they were not sitting down at the restaurant, bar, etc. In October, November and December 2020, the authorities continued to tighten the restrictions. For example, the national test capacity was extended with an ambition of reaching 70-80,000 people daily. The limits on gatherings were further lowered from 50 to 10.

In mid-November 2020, the Alpha variant was registered in Denmark. In December, the DHA recommended that the Christmas and New Year's Eve ought to be held with less than 10 persons. During that month, all shopping centres were closed, as were restaurants. Schools sent their pupils home, but teachers had to carry out teaching online. Children's institutions were closed, including their leisure time activities. The liberal professions were closed. All shops except supermarkets and pharmacies were closed. Under big media attention, the first vaccines were delivered, and the first Danes were vaccinated. One of the last days in December 2020, the Danish prime minister held one more press conference. It was announced that the restrictions were to be extended to the 17th of January 2021, and that people should cancel their New Year's celebrations.

At the beginning of January 2021, almost 1,900 people were registered dead because of Covid-19. Mid-January 2021, the Beta variant was detected in Denmark, and in the beginning of March, the Gamma variant turned up. It was also in the first couple of months that the level of risk was at its highest in the five-level warning system based on the spread of the virus. Because of this, all the restrictions were extended one more time to the end of February 2021. Yet, already at the beginning of February 2021, the pupils up to "4. Klasse" (primary school) were allowed to return to class. The restrictive guidelines on how to behave continued. The limits on gatherings were lowered to five persons. Once again, the test strategy was extended.

In March 2021, Denmark decided to pause the AstraZeneca vaccine because several studies noted the prevalence of a very serious side effect. From March to April 2021, the gathering restrictions were changed, first from 5, then to 10, and then to 25. In April, bars, restaurants, and libraries were re-opened. It meant that Danish society had almost re-opened again. In mid-May 2021, boarding schools for lower secondary students returned to school. During spring, the vaccination programme was rolled out. There was a high vaccine uptake among the Danish population. At the end of May

2021, 20% of the Danish citizens had had their first vaccination. During June, July, and August 2021, masks were only required on public transport. The Delta variant was now the dominant corona virus in Denmark. At the end of August 2021, 70% of the Danish population had been vaccinated, including 77% of children from 12 to 15 years old. In September 2021, it was announced that Covid-19 was not any longer characterised as a critical societal disease in Denmark. 298,420 people had had Covid-19. A re-vaccination programme was started. The first people to receive the boosters were the elderly in care homes.

In November 2021, Covid-19 once again was considered as a critical societal disease. Despite this, election to the Municipalities and the regions was held as planned the 16th of November. Late November, the Omicron variant was registered in Denmark. Theatres, museums, and folk high schools were closed again. One day in late January 2022, the daily tests registered 34,976 cases of Covid-19. On that same day 1,764,257 Danes had had the virus or had been re-infected. On the 1st of February 2022, all restrictions were lifted, and Covid-19 was no longer considered a critical societal disease. In December 2022, the health authorities announced that Covid-19 would be handled like all other viruses.

1.3 Mink, Covid 19, and the illegal order to destroy all mink in Denmark

In mid-June 2020, some minks were tested positive with Covid-19 at a mink farm. The authorities decided to destroy all 11,000 minks. Three weeks later, the government and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (MAFF), Mogens Jensen, declared that the development of the virus at all mink farms was under observation. In addition, the mink farmers were ordered to wear masks, gloves, wash hands, use alcohol for disinfection, and change clothes after being in contact with the mink. At the beginning of September 2020, the State's Serum Institute (SSI) declaimed that they had found a special variant of the Covid-19 virus in the mink. The virus had been transferred from minks to human beings. Soon after, SSI sent out a risk assessment. It was estimated that the virus variant in the minks could be immune to the vaccines that were under development. Because of this, a new strategy from SSI was sent out on the 1st of October 2020. All the minks (over 1 million) in a secure zone around 7.8 kilometres from the infected mink farm had to be destroyed. At the beginning of November, a new risk assessment from SSI concluded that a continuing retention of mink farming was a significant threat to public health, including the risk of impacting the efficacy of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Because of this, the Danish Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (MAFF) held a press conference on the 4th of November, where they announced that all mink had to be destroyed. But it turned out that there was no legal authority (see 1.3) behind the order, something that was acknowledged by the MAFF and the Minister of Justice (MJ) later the same day. Despite this, the illegal order from the PM continued to be rolled out by the National Police. On the 7th of November 2020, the police informed the mink farmers that the decision to destroy all mink was

irreversible and that if the farmers did not cooperate with the police, they would not receive compensation. It was also on the 7th of November 2020 that the MAFF acknowledged that a change in the legislation was necessary, something that the PM was presumably informed about as late as the 8th of November 2020. Two days later, the Danish Food Authority (DFA) sent a new letter to the mink farmers. In the letter, the agency acknowledged that the first letter from the police could appear as an order but as they pointed out, it was just an invitation to do so. Soon after the PM recognised that the order to destroy the minks had been illegal and unconstitutional, she briefed the political spokespersons from the other political parties about the lack of legal authority. Still, it took over a month from the enactment of the illegal order to when the emergency law (that made the illegal order legal) was adopted by Parliament.

The Mink Case is still a subject of discussion in Denmark. In June 2022, a report about the illegal order was published. It was written by the commission of scrutiny, a commission that was appointed by the parliament in April 2021 to investigate the Mink Case. The commission concluded that the order was illegal, that the announcements to mink farmers and the public on 4th November and the days following had been grossly misleading, including PM Mette Frederiksen's statements. But it was also stated that the PM and the Ministers involved did not know that they had acted without legal authority. In addition, ten high ranking officials were criticised for their misconduct in office, and consequently some of them were given a warning or a reprimand. In two cases, they were relieved of their duties, while an official investigation was opened.

The latest news in mid-April 2023 is that the Prime Minister's Ministry have revoked the disciplinary warnings after an official inquiry led by a judge of the supreme court and two high court judges. The reason for the recall is that some of the high-ranking officials apparently have not committed any misconduct. But the case is not closed. Legal experts have questioned the withdrawal, so without doubt the Mink Case is still of interest to the public, and will continue to be discussed, not least because the principle at stake is trust in democratic government, the authorities, and the politicians.

1.4 Public opinion on trust-related issues

As described in this introductory part of the report, the Mink Case changed the population's trust towards the government in a negative way. It is difficult to prove a direct connection between the decrease in trust and the Mink Case, but different studies have indicated a correlation between the two incidents. For example, a study from the Danish Hope-project[5] has documented that the citizens' trust in government decreased from around 90 % on the 18th of March to around 60 % by the 18th of November, and then again increased to around 70 % for the rest of the period[6] (Nielsen et.al, 2022). Further, another analysis from the Danish Hope-project has documented that

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[5] HOPE stands for How Democracies Cope with COVID 19

[6] https://raw.githubusercontent.com/mariefly/HOPE/master/Danskernes_Adf%C3%A6rd_Og_Holdning_Til_Corona-epidemien__20210219.pdf

an anti-government group on Facebook raised their followers in the period from the 31st of October (8,510 members) to the 28th of November (21,312). As a counterbalance, a pro-government group experienced the same increase in the same measured period, from 1,721 followers to 9,933 followers (Kristensen, 2020). In addition, a public report from 2021[7] criticises the restrictive lockdown measures. The measures were not entirely backed by scientific arguments. The health authorities suggested a gentler reaction to the disease. In addition, the overall purpose with the measurements was to nudge people on behalf of the whole community to show "community spirit" in terms of "a high level of trust that the community will do what is necessary for everyone given the circumstances (Højme, 2022:34). While the Mink Case probably changed citizens' trust in the government, this does not seem to be the case with the vaccines. They were met with general high approval (Petersen & Roepstorff, 2021).

2. Procedures and participants

2.1 Procedure

As a part of the preliminary procedures, we applied to the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Humanities of Law, University of Copenhagen for ethical approval. The application was sent the 25th of April 2022, and WP5's ethical approval was returned to us on the 20th of May 2022.

In the waiting period, we translated different documents from English to Danish, e.g., focus group guidelines for the different age groups, consent forms, demography schemes. The translation was made by FSM, and thereafter in correlation with FSM corrected by the responsible researcher in Denmark, Anne Brus. The documents included a demography questionnaire, sampling guidelines, preliminary focus group guidelines and questions, and documents for informed consent for parents, with a simplified version for children.

Thereafter, we conducted two pre-test focus interviews to see if the translation of the questions worked, and whether the questions were clear to the participants. The first interview was conducted with three 11/12-year-old children; the second was conducted online with four 18- to 19-year-old adolescents.

The recruitment of all 38 focus group participants has been difficult and it has taken far more time than estimated. We started the recruitment process by contacting several schools, after-school centres, leisure time organisations, sports organisations, but with no success at all. At the same time, we tried to recruit interviewees from our own network, and made use of the snowball sampling method (Parker et.al. 2019) where gatekeepers recommend other potential participants. The snowball sampling did set off a small chain of possible participants, but far from enough and with less success than usual. Many of the potential participants were not interested in the project,

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[7]   https://www.ft.dk/-/media/sites/ft/pdf/publikationer/haandtering-af-covid19-foraar-2020.ashx

maybe precisely because the subject was related to trust during the pandemic, which at the time of the recruitment was no longer topical as Denmark was without restrictions, and many people wanted to get on with their 'normal' life, not to think back to a period when they had been forced to live under such restrictions. Another obstacle was the children that we had to contact through their parents. We therefore changed our recruitment strategies. We decided to make use of a reward (300 kr. for each participant). Another strategy was recruitment through Facebook, but only a few people replied to our posts. The last strategy was the public libraries. We hired two student assistants to tour around Copenhagen, hanging posters up in libraries with a description of the project and contact information. It turned out to be the most successful strategy.

Before we conducted the interviews, we asked the participants to complete a consent form and return them signed to us by e-mail. Consent forms from children under 15 years old were signed by their parents.

One of the focus group interviews was conducted in May 2022, another in August 2022, and the last six in September 2022. All interviews lasted more than an hour, with a minimum of 1:00, a maximum of 1:25, and an average of 1:09 hours. The focus group interviews were conducted by two moderators. One moderator was responsible for asking questions; the other for the potential problems that could occur during the interviews. There were only a few technical problems during the interviews, otherwise everything went smoothly and went smoothly for the participants involved. All the involved participants. After the interviews were conducted, the video recording was stored at the university's secure online platform and thereafter transcribed into text.

2.2 Participants

In all, we succeeded in recruiting 40 participants, 24 females and 16 males. The table below shows the participants' school track/highest education, age, gender, and place of living in each focus groups. The names of the participants are changed to pseudonyms in the table. All the recruited 11- to 19-year-old children and young people go to public school. The table also gives information about the educational background of the adolescents' parents.

Name	Age	Gender	School track / highest education	Education mother	Education father	Place of living
Focus group 11-12 A (n = 4)						
Malthe	12	Male	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Larger city
Alberte	11	Female	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Suburb of a larger city

Alba	12	Female	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Smaller city
Selena	11	Female	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Master's programmes	Larger city
Focus group 11-12 B (n = 5)						
Noah	12	Male	Lower secondary	Master's programmes	Master's programmes	Larger city
Carla	11	Female	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Suburb of a larger city
Hannah	12	Female	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Village
Celine	12	Female	Lower secondary	Vocational education and training	Bachelor's programmes	Larger city
Freja	12	Female	Lower secondary	Master's programmes	Master's programmes	Smaller city
Focus group 14-15 A (n = 5)						
Julius	15	Male	Lower secondary	Not Available	Not Available	Larger city
Emil	15	Male	Lower secondary	Vocational education and training	Vocational education and training	Larger city
Fiona	14	Female	Lower secondary	Master's programmes	Master's programmes	Larger city
Johanne	14	Female	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Master's programmes	Larger city
Simon	14	Male	Lower secondary	General upper secondary education	Not Available	Suburb of a larger city
Focus group 14-15 B (n = 6)						
Lasse	15	Male	Lower secondary	Lower secondary	Vocational education	Suburbs
Pia	14	Female	Lower secondary	Master's programmes	Master's programmes	Larger city
Ole	14	Male	Lower secondary	Master's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Larger city
Sonja	14	Female	Lower secondary	Master's programmes	Master's programmes	Larger city
Sandra	14	Female	Lower secondary	Master's programmes	Master's programmes	Larger city
Line	14	Female	Lower secondary	Bachelor's programmes	Master's programmes	Suburbs

Focus group 18-19 A (n = 4)						
Frida	18	Female	General upper secondary education	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Countryside
Karl	19	Male	Vocational education	Bachelor's programmes	Vocational education	Larger city
Ellen	19	Female	General upper secondary education	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Larger city
Marie	19	Female	General upper secondary education	Vocational education	Vocational education	Village
Focus group 18-19 B (n = 5)						
Peter	19	Male	Vocational education	Vocational education	Vocational education	Suburbs
Ida	19	Female	General upper secondary education	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Larger city
Lars	19	Male	General upper secondary education	Higher education	General upper secondary education	Larger city
Mads	18	Male	General upper secondary education	Bachelor's programmes	Higher education	Village
Sofie	19	Female	General upper secondary education	Bachelor's programmes	Bachelor's programmes	Countryside
Focus group 30+ A (n = 5)						
Annette	50	Female	Bachelor's programmes			Large city
Jacob	46	Male	Vocational education and training			Smaller city
Matilde	31	Female	Master's programmes			Larger city
Thomas	44	Male	Master's programmes			Larger city
Tina	48	Female	General upper secondary education			Larger city
Focus group 30+ B (n = 4)						
Frans	49	Male	Higher education			Larger city
Poul	33	Male	Bachelor's programmes			Larger city

| Mona | 42 | Female | Lower secondary | | | Larger city |
| Kasper | 48 | Male | General upper secondary education | | | Village |

2.3 Data analysis

Our analysis was processed with an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). The data-driven coding process was prepared by three coders. We followed the guidelines suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). First, we created codes in each of the focus-group interviews. At the same time, the meaning units of the codes were interpreted into a text as close as possible to the data. If the meaning units had some interesting and important points, we added an interpretation at the end of the meaning units. In the phase of creating the themes, the team met a couple of times to get a shared understanding of how to create a theme. We proceeded half an interview together. Thereafter, the theme process was divided between two of the coders in a shared One Note document, so everyone could follow the creative process. In this part of the process, we ended up with five themes. After these preliminary manoeuvres, the data had been through several new iterative processes. Finally, we have ended up with six themes. In the next section, we will present the results of the thematic analysis.

3. Results from the thematic analysis

In the thematic analysis process, we have created themes that cut across the research questions. In addition, the themes are so broad that they can imply trust related questions on both the interpersonal level and at the institutional level. The themes are also elaborated on without distinguishing between the age of the participants and which focus group they participated in.

We have generated six themes from the 838 codes created from the text outcome of the eight focus group interviews. Out of these codes, we have a relatively high group of code leftovers (163). They are mainly related to the first question about the participants' experiences with the pandemic. The point is that many of the leftovers do not relate to trust. There are also a few examples of codes that consider (dis)trust as related to self-confidence. To answer the research questions, the themes have been divided into two thematic clusters, respectively 'meanings of trust' and 'sources of trust'.

Meanings of (dis)trust:

1. (Dis)trust as a dynamic and reciprocal process developed over time under certain conditions in a specific context (217 codes)
2. Ambiguous (dis)trust (125 codes)
3. Moral reflections about (dis)trust behaviour and (dis)trust situations (18 codes)

Sources of (dis)trust:

1. (Lack of) transparency and (un)predictability as sources to develop (dis)trust (164 codes)
2. Distrust as a protection source (129 codes)
3. Between trust and distrust – the importance of being critical as part of developing (dis)trust (22 codes)

In the following six sections, we will present the themes one by one. Every section starts with an overall description of the theme. After this, and with the research questions in mind, we describe the different age groups' reflections on the theme to identify possible age variabilities. At the end of each section, we will sum up the most important differences in age within the theme.

3.2 (Dis)trust as a dynamic and reciprocal process developed over time under certain conditions in a specific context

This theme describes (dis)trust as a reciprocal relationship that is developed in a negotiation between two or more persons/actors in a specific context. (Dis)trust is a dynamic process developed over time, often based on feelings or earlier experiences. It is to some degree a steady and unspoken (dis)trust that people don not give much thought to in their daily life. But sometimes, (dis)trust demands work from the people that are involved in the process. The theme thus underlines the importance of (dis)trust as something that people give and take under certain conditions. Before an agreement of trusting/not trusting can take place, people expect something back (e.g., honesty or keeping a secret). Certain conditions thus refer to people's demands on others' behaviour. Therefore, (dis)trust is also about taking risks.

The **11/12 age group** trust their friends if they can rely on them, do things with them, and if the friends can keep a secret (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B). Some of the 11/12-year-olds describe how they mainly trust friends that have the same kinds of problems as themselves: "They know how I feel" (DK FG 11/12 B). They also rely heavily on their parents. Some of them also express high trust in their parents because they kept up with the news during the pandemic (DK FG 11/12 A).

Further, they underline that they trusted the measures (cleaning, mask, hand sanitiser, distance) because they got used to them (DK FG 11/12 A). During the pandemic, some of the 11/12 age group changed school because they experienced different practices in handling the measurements (DK FG 11/12 B). In one school, they did not talk about the measurements, nor did they test the pupils. At another school, they tested two or three times per week. Because of the regular testing, they thought that some schools had more control over the situation, and it made them feel safer and more trustful of the institutions (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B).

In addition, trust in actors at the institutional level minimised the risk of getting ill (DK FG 11/12 A). People did what they were told to do, which resulted in Covid-19 not being a threat anymore, and it also led to the easing of restrictions (DK FG 11/12 A; DK

FG 11/12 B). It is the same with the minks because the case ended well (DK FG 11/12. People have also learned how to get through a crisis and how good it is to trust politicians (DK FG 11/12 B). Further, with the vaccination programme and the tests, the government showed that they cared about people and prevented them from being ill (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B).

Others describe their trust in the government as conditional because the lockdown was the reason why they could not see their families (DK FG 11/12 A). It is also interesting that one of the interviewees describes his trust as based on whether it complicated his daily life and ran contrary to his own wishes: When the government recommended that we stay at home, I did not bother to trust the government (DK FG 11/12 A). It is something that many of the younger interviewees paid attention to. Others trusted the government because their parents have never expressed outright distrust (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B).

Trust is sometimes about taking risks because sometimes trust changes to distrust (DK FG 11/12 B). A risk could be when the other(s) have told a secret to a friend, and the friend afterwards betrays the one that trusts, for example, by gossiping, being mean, or spreading stories (DK FG 11/12; DK FG 11/12 B). Unquestionable, the age group distrusts annoying friends and classmates that tease (DK FG 11/12; DK FG 11/12 B).

The **14/15-year-olds-age groups** highlight the steadiness in (dis)trust. They trust people who look after them (DK FG 14/15 A). They also think that it is good to have at least a few people to trust because they cannot count on everybody 100%. This is the way trust works, as an interviewee remarked (DK FG 14/15 B). As with the 11-/12-year-olds, it is characteristic that the 14/15-year-olds (DK FG 14/15 B) trust friends that never cheat on or lie to them; they also frequently mentioned that trust is built over time (DK FG 14/15 B). Trust makes them happy (DK FG 14/15 B). In line with this, some of them trust people who want what is best for them, and who never try to do them wrong, and who always protect them (DK FG 14/15 A). This age group also thinks that trust is developed with others with whom they can discuss since it shows that neither of them is afraid to speak their minds if they disagree with one another. It confirms that what they say is what they mean (DK FG 14/15 A). They also prefer to trust people who will help and guide them (DK FG 14/15 A; DK FG 14/15 B).

Further, the reciprocity of (dis)trust is important. If someone takes a risk and trusts a person, then the person will usually receive trust back (DK FG 14/15 A). When they meet someone who distrusts everyone, they will automatically distrust them, and they will not confide in them. As one of them says: "I don't trust someone who does not trust me" (DK FG 14/15 A). This age group also set up the same (dis)trust conditions as the youngest age group. For example, one of the 14/15-year-olds mentions that if a person spreads rumours, trust will be changed to distrust in this person. They can be friends again, but they will be suspicious of whether this person will spread rumours again (DK FG 14/15 A). Distrust is okay if someone directly breaks a person's trust e.g., by telling the person's secrets to other people (DK FG 14/15 B). An interesting perspective is that this age group shows awareness of how the distrusted person also gets

mentally affected (DK FG 14/15 B). The distrusted persons can sense that they are doing something wrong, and therefore it is important to try not to be too unsympathetic, but rather think about why the persons have reacted with distrust. It is also highlighted that listening promotes understanding which in turn makes people help each other out and increases trust (DK FG 14/15 B).

Many in this age group also have great trust in the government, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, taking government at their word that they would be able to contain the pandemic (DK FG 14/15 A; DK FG 14/15 B). Some of them, however, reacted with irritation when shops and malls were closed. To others, their trust depended on the situation at home, not on what the responsible actors said (DK FG 14/15 A). If the online classes went well, and they could hang out with their neighbours, their trust increased or remained steady. In addition, trust depended on whether they felt comfortable with the measurements. If they had the feeling of progress, that the situation was somehow moving forward, they had trust. But if they were isolated from the outside world because of the virus, their distrust in the government increased "a little" (DK FG 14/15 A).

The **18/19-year-olds** are more direct when they talk about trust. Trust is being open, honest, careful, and hesitant, not dismissive (DK FG 18/19 B). But they take their precautions. Nightlife sometimes demands that people prove their trustworthiness before they are trusted (DK FG 18/19 A; DK FG 18/19 B). Further, they differ between trust to people in their nearest environments and in actors at the institutional level. Trust in families and friends has a different foundation from trust in professionals. Many of them also mention their mothers when they talk about whom they trust. They love their mothers because they act in a trustful way (DK FG 18/19 A). As with the two former age groups, the reciprocity in a trustful friendship is important. On the one hand, trust is determined by the way people react, behave and care about the other (DK FG 18/19 A). On the other hand, a person will lose people's trust if they do something that indicates the opposite. Trust in another person is also about taking a risk. If people give trust, then they will usually get something back (DK FG 18/19 B). Further, the 18/19-year-olds have expectations of each other as part of the process that contributes to (dis)trust in an interpersonal relationship (DK FG 18/19 B). People can be let down (DK FG 18/19 A). In addition, there is the risk of generalisation (DK FG 18/19 B). If people have experienced distrust in one situation, they take that distrust with them into a new situation and tend to distrust people beforehand based on their previous negative experiences.

Trust in a doctor or a teacher is mainly based on their skills and competences, and not because of their interpersonal relation (DK FG 18/19 A).

Regarding (dis)trust in policy makers, the 18/19-year-olds are more critical than the two younger age groups. Some say that their trust in the Danish prime minister is low because their friends are not particularly fond of her (DK FG 18/19 B). Others think that politicians must gain trust; it is not something that they get beforehand (DK FG 18/19 B). It is easier to distrust the politicians because they do not have any personal relations

with them, as one mentions (DK FG 18/19 B). It is a superficial relation that is created through the media.

Some also developed distrust in the government, politicians, or the authorities, because they expressed distrust in young people. The policy makers did not think that the younger generation complied with measures, wherefore the young people stopped trusting: "You feel bad, ok, move on" (DK FG 18/19 A). In this way, the age group underline that (dis)trust must be a reciprocal relationship, also at the institutional level. Distrust creates distrust, and vice versa. Another (dis)trust dilemma is about having confidence in politicians. This age group see a dilemma between the vote that gives the politicians power and the risk of being let down afterwards. As they say, they cannot know whether the politicians will use their position to fulfil what they promised before they got elected (DK FG 18/19 A).

The **30+ age groups** emphasise that honesty and not being judgemental are necessary features if they are to trust someone (DK FG 30+ A). They know that they can tell their friends anything, and even though they may find it strange, most friends will help and act in a trustworthy manner which increases trust. The important thing is to be embraced by friends, no matter what (DK FG 30+ A). Friends will always back one up, as an interviewee states (DK FG 30+ B). Other interviewees trust people who show a pragmatic mindset and who try to let rationality influence their behaviour, utterances, and decisions (DK FG 30+ A). They also show trust in people with integrity, who stand up for what they believe, and who do what they say they will (DK FG 30+ B). To the 30+, trust is not only something that people "gain" from others. Sometimes, it is a hard work because it can be a demanding and draining process.

Interestingly though, the age group is more reluctant to talk about trust in their loved ones. Presumably, that is because it is difficult to talk openly about private feelings in a focus group with people they do not know.

The 30+ age groups are highly aware of what and whom they distrust. It also involves not wanting to hurt other people (DK FG 30+ B). If it feels right, they have no trouble in deeming a friend untrustworthy (DK FG 30+ B). Others distrust people without empathy (DK FG 30+ B). In addition, it is mentioned that they distrust people who are not fond of them, talk to them in a condescending way, or show intolerance to other people (DK FG 30+ A). Some of the interviewees also distrust people who always refer things back to themselves and therefore have difficulties in understanding perspectives and viewpoints which are different from their own (DK FG 30+ A).

All acknowledge the importance of democracy. Someone must have control, and citizens must be governed to prevent chaos (DK FG 30+ A). This provides a feeling of safety since the masses are being guided in the right direction backed by professional advice about what is best for everyone (DK FG 30+ A). The need for government is why Dane's vote, and the way society functions (DK FG 30+ A). A worst-case scenario could be an increased use of force by the government since they are obliged to protect their citizens (DK FG 30+ A), However, people can never know if this is the case prior to trusting them (DK FG 30+ B).

Regarding trust in policy makers, the 30+ age groups highlight the decisionmakers' ability to explain the measures. This age group also brings up honesty as an important trust factor in relation to the policy makers (DK FG 30+ A). One interviewee mentions the PM's message in the beginning of the pandemic, that Covid-19, an unknown territory, would inevitably result in politicians making mistakes: "This is uncharted territory, its uncharted waters, so mistakes are bound to happen" (DK FG 30+ A). This degree of honesty about their own limitations and abilities is mostly unheard of in politics, and therefore it increased the 30+'s trust in politicians (DK FG 30+ A).

All age groups highlight an increase in trust if people have good intentions or are honest, both in an interpersonal relationship and to policy makers at the institutional level. The 11/12, 14/15, and the 18/19 age groups describe their trust in close family members as absolute and without conditions. To the youngest age group, reciprocity is not expressed explicitly. Trust is when they are being cared for, listened to, and accepted (one-way) by their family and friends. The youngest group also depends heavily on their parents' opinion. They adapt to their parents' (dis)trust without asking critical questions. Some of the 18- /19-year-olds are very concrete when they (all females) highlight their mothers as the most trustful person they know. The 30+ refer to their experiences and the freedom of whom to trust and to be close to. On the one hand, some of the 30+ group have confidence because they know that certain people will never judge them but accept them unconditionally. Others are more reluctant to trust because of the challenges they have had in their meetings with others.

3.2 Ambiguous (dis)trust

Sometimes, the ambiguity of (dis)trust is expressed in an explicit way. Such expressions of ambiguity (dis)trust refer to the former meaning of (dis)trust, but they capture how people juggle with different levels of trust when something unforeseen is happening. The reciprocity in ambiguous (dis)trust creates a myriad of different (dis)trust combinations and levels. Ambiguous (dis)trust refers to the fluctuating, complex, and diffuse character of (dis)trust explicitly, and does not follow a linear logic. Trust and distrust exist side by side at the same time. The reciprocal (dis)trust become ambiguous for a while because of situations that are not understandable, acceptable, rational, or trustworthy.

At the interpersonal level, ambiguous (dis)trust is seen when **the 11-/12-year-olds** explain that there is a person they both trust and distrust. For example, one of the interviewees knows a person that sometimes lies and other times not, which makes it possible to trust the friend even though the friend is sometimes distrustful (DK FG 11/12 A). Another interviewee talks about distrust of a person that turned out to be wrong (DK FG 11/12 B).

The ambiguous (dis)trust becomes especially clear when the 11-/12-year-olds talk about their (dis)trust of the actors and institutions during the pandemic. On the one hand, they had great trust in the government and the measures because as many of them argue, the government took trustworthy choices, and the government appeared

reliable when they talked about the measurements (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B). The lockdown was a decision for the whole country and an important initiative to minimise the risk of getting exposed to infection (DK FG 11/12 A). If the government had not imposed the measures, then the country perhaps would never have got rid of Covid-19, as one of the 11-/12-year- olds states (DK FG 11/12 B). On the other hand, they experienced a decrease in their trust in the government the further they got into the pandemic. At the beginning, they knew what to do and therefore everyone just trusted the government, but after a period, when people realised that the measures were not that effective, there were a decrease in trust. The decision to destroy all the mink was also difficult to comprehend. It was a drastic reaction (DK FG 11/12 A) and changed the 11-/12-year-olds' high levels of trust to a little less trust. As one of the children reflects, why did they only destroyed the minks - and not other animals, since they all could contaminate (DK FG 11/12 A). Another child refers to the decision that was made:

> *I lost a lot of my trust because the mink was destroyed. Especially, because I heard on the news that it was an illegal decision to destroy them. So, I got somehow a little annoyed that they destroyed them after all, even though they did not have the permission to do so* (DK FG 11/12 A).

Some of the 11-/12-year-olds also had less trust in the vaccines while they turned out to be unsafe (DK FG 11/12 A). Others are more positive to the vaccines. The vaccines made them trustful as they were a step in the right direction regarding fighting the virus.

The 14-/15-year-old age groups have difficulties in navigating the many opinions they get from parents and friends, not least because they are about to form their own opinion about life, as one of the interviewees says (DK FG 14/15 B).

As with the youngest age group, the 14-/15-year-olds find that the government's lockdown was the right decision (DK FG 14/15 B). They trusted the government because apparently, in the beginning the government had the Covid-19 situation under control. It created more calmness and less anxiety about the future (DK FG 14/15 B). The experts appeared trustworthy because they knew what they were talking about due to their prominent position as the Danish Health Authority (DK FG 14/15 A). As they argue, if people had distrusted the politicians, and no-one had complied with the issued measures, the situation would have worsened since people could infect others, even the high-risk groups (DK FG 14/15 A). But after a period, the 14/15-year-olds realised that the measures were not that effective, and sometimes the initiatives seemed illogical and "*wrong*" (DK FG 14/15 A), e.g., the limit on social gatherings and the lockdowns:

> *We listened to what they said. But then, the summer came, and many things were normalised … And when the lockdown was initiated again in December, my trust decreased. I could not follow their decisions anymore. They changed their point of view all the time* (DK FG 14/15 A).

To **the 18-/19-year-olds',** trust is not something that a person can take for granted. In

some situations, people become doubtful of the other person in the relationship. It leads to a loss of some of the confidence that the relationship is built on (DK FG 18/19 B). The meaning of ambiguous (dis)trust is developed in discussions where people become familiar with other opinions (DK FG 18/19 A). But it sometimes means that people get divided on how they construct their own meanings: "*Where am I in this discussion?*" (DK FG 18/19 B). Therefore, they doubt what the core of the truth is, and whom to trust.

Regarding (dis)trust at the institutional level, the age group was challenged because of the pandemic. On the one hand, it created a lot of frustration. On the other hand, it was a happy situation when the measures were eased (DK FG 18/19 B). Others are ambiguous about, for example, the vaccines (DK FG 18/19 B):

> *I had a lot of discussions with my parents about it … should I have the vaccine or should I not have it. My parents were very much like: Yes, you should and it's good! But I was very sceptical about it myself… I didn't really know if I wanted the vaccine! It was kind of weird in a way that I didn't really feel that it worked. I just felt that you must have it to fit into society, because I felt that if you didn't get the vaccine, you couldn't do some specific things… It was weird! Because you must be part of society, I felt. I only got the vaccine because then I could be a* (makes inverted commas with fingers) *"free person" or something. It's strange!… I didn't really want to, but you had to in a way get the vaccine* (DK FG 18/19 B).

In line with all the other age groups, **the 30+** focus groups show the same high trust level in the beginning of the pandemic as the other age groups. They were in favour of the new epidemic legislation and state of emergency since it made it possible to mobilise society quickly (DK FG 30+ A). However, they later perceived the government as acting too quickly and without including the opposition politicians (DK FG 30+ A). To some, their trust level changed when the decisions and legislation accelerated, for example, when the measurements were illogical and conflicted with their professional opinion as health-care employees (DK FG 30+ B). In line with this, others' trust levels altered due to the policy makers' decisions about mass-testing and mass-vaccination (DK FG 30+ B). The scale of these measures was perceived as too far-reaching. The policy makers were seen as ignorant about possible negative influences of these measures on people's mental health, which made some in the age group disobey the measures and recommendations (DK FG 30+ A). For example, it was the young generation who suffered the most during the pandemic due to measures hampering them especially. Along with these statements, a few experienced 'ambiguous trust' because of the recommendation of the third vaccination (DK FG 30+ B).

(Dis)trust in responsible parties during Covid-19 is fluctuating in general. People learn to differentiate (dis)trust and **all age groups** describe how the measurements and the policy makers caused ambiguous (dis)trust. The age groups' trust was threatened because some of the measurements were illogical and did not make sense. Ambiguous (dis)trust is not an either/or. Sometimes, people can be friends with someone without trusting them.

3.3 Moral reflections about (dis)trust behaviour and (dis)trust situations during the pandemic

This theme takes up people's social indignation regarding what is right or wrong, mainly based on their personal values. The two other themes also contain an aspect of normative reflections in the sense that the themes deal with our interviewees' reflections about how (dis)trust ought to be and ought not to be. But this theme goes a little further and focuses on (dis)trust situations where the interviewees invest their emotions and deem other people's behaviour or pandemic related situations as 'morally unfair' or 'morally wrong'.

The **11-/12-year-olds** say that distrust built on prejudices can lead to a feeling of guilt. It is important to be aware of the risk of judging the bad person because sometimes, people's opinions are wrong and can be based on prejudice (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B). But occasionally, moral judgement of another person changes e.g., when a person gets to know a person better. For example, an interviewee recalls a classmate of his that played games in the lesson hours. It made the interviewee distrust him. He thought the classmate was anti-social. However, he found out that his classmate was good at many things (basketball, working together in class) which made the interviewee feel guilty since he had thought his classmate was anti-social DK FG 11/12 B). Another moral aspect depicted in this age group is when a few of the 11/12-years-olds talk about other people that did not respect the measurements. For example, an interviewee describes how she used masks, hand sanitiser, and kept her distance as she was told to do. She did not want the virus transmitted to her. Therefore, she felt uncomfortable and got very angry at people that tried to hug her and she wished they would keep their distance instead (DK FG 11/12 A).

In the **14/15-year age groups**, an interviewee mentions the limit of gathering that was raised while the Prime Minister's had planned her wedding. It shows that the PM acted not only on behalf of the people, but also on what is convenient for the PM herself: "Somehow, she cheated us!" (DK FG 14/15 A). The purpose of the measurement was to decrease the number of infected, but it made the PM untrustworthy. It was an act that was motivated in favour of the PM's own interests: "Do different rules apply to the PM than to the rest of us?". Another interviewee continues this line of judging others' immoral behaviour. People with distrust did not follow the restrictions and measures. As a result, other people were uneasy about the measures: "If they don't wear masks, why can't I take it off?" (DK FG 14/15 B), as the interviewee notices. Others reflect on the values they meet in school. For example, an interviewee distrusts her teacher who has a different view on the upbringing of children which tend to display passive aggressive tendencies. She does not feel a person with these characteristics should be responsible for her education (DK FG 14/15 A). Another interviewee does not trust politicians if their opinions are different from her own, especially regarding topics such as human rights and refugees (DK FG 14/15 A). In line with this statement, but targeting a politician, an interviewee expresses distrust in the Minister of Health because he forgot to put on a health mask in a gym. As the interviewee argues: "What the hell is he doing, he doesn't even remember his own rules and still gives people tickets for not remembering to abide by them" (DK FG 14/15 B).

Many of the **18-/19-year-olds** show indignation towards different topics that collide with their values. The topics circle around distrusting strangers, racists, and far-right politicians because basing people on stereotypes is morally wrong because it puts them "into boxes" (DK FG 18/19 A; DK FG 18/19 B). Others distrusted people who were too restrictive in keeping the measures. Further, the age groups have many comments to make about the PM, the government, and their handling of the Mink Case. The Mink Case was an example of a wrong policy, as one of them states. The government must take the consequences of their problematic decisions: "One can't remain in the position as a PM, if one hasn't a clear conscience" (DK FG 18/19 B). In line with this, it is pointed out that closing an industry at short notice, and without having the formal rights to do so was wrong. They refer to a well-known comment from the PM: "Live with it!". But as they reflect on the PM's statements, they now understand that she knew that what she had done was "shitty", but with the comment she closed the case and insinuated: "You must keep silent everyone. I do what I think is right, and you have nothing to say on this matter" (DK FG 18/19 B). They also think that the government's politics lacked nuances. The politics favoured specific businesses and firms instead of art, institutions, and education, all of which suffered economic consequences during the pandemic.

Some in the **30+ age groups** emphasise the importance of a clear moral compass because this makes the person extremely predictable and reliable (DK FG 30+ B). In line with the youngest age group, a few in this age group mention that they distrusted citizens if they were not following restriction guidelines e.g., not putting on masks on public transport, and doctors who spread false information online. But new political topics are also pointed out as morally wrong. For example, it created distrust in the Minister of Defence when the Minister began to interfere the concrete work of officials (police, military). It was experienced as an abuse of power (DK FG 30+ B). Further, the former one-party government, led by the Social Democratic Party, is described as having absolute power because the members in the government "pat each other on the back" all the time and thereby avoid criticism and reactions by supporting parties (DK FG 30+ B). It should not be possible for a single party to occupy every single ministerial post (DK FG 30+ B). They also point out that the government is not lead by the most competent and skilled people (DK FG 30+ B).

In this theme, **all age groups** deem people who were not keeping the measures, but we also see examples of the opposite; people judging others that are keeping strictly to the recommendations. The youngest age group are mainly concerned with the risks that people expose them to in this connection. It is interesting that it is the youngest age group that come up with an example of how distrust built on morals can be changed to trust. The youngest age group shows a positive and open attitude towards others, and they underline the importance of keeping the social order without conflicts. Both the 14-/15- and the 18-/19-year-olds are likely to see the world from their own perspectives. Their indignation operates out of their own world. Especially, the 18-/19-year-old age groups give many examples of this, whether it is about a schoolteacher's lack of competence, the PM's selfishness, or the government's arrogance that are at play. Still, the 18-/19-year-olds are also reflecting on moral issues as ambiguous and approach their indignant (dis)trust from different angles. The 30+ are more

turned to governance and democracy. Their indignation is somehow more politically oriented.

3.4 (Lack of) transparency and (un)predictability as sources to develop (dis)trust

While the first three themes have focused on the interviewees' meanings of trust, the next three themes will describe which sources of trust and distrust are constructed in this context. The sense of transparency qualifies (dis)trust. If people act in an honest way, it gives others reason to trust. The lack of transparency is related to unclear situations where people can't see through what is going on. The unknown creates uncertainty and a feeling of doubt to the outcome. But if the situation is transparent, people can better meet the uncertainty with trust. Still, transparency is often not enough. The theme also indicates that predictability increases trust. If a situation is clear, and people can see through what is going to happen, it increases trust. If people behave in a way that allows others to understand what people are doing, it increases trust and the others' reliability. The theme thereby implies people's and society's vulnerability in complex, unpleasant, and unforeseen situations.

To **11-/12-year-olds** transparency in an interpersonal relationship is related to situations where a person is telling the truth (DK FG 11/12 B). On the institutional level, clear communication is an essential factor. For example, transparency is related to situations when the government took the responsibility to lead the Danish citizens through the lockdown, made secure choices, took wise decisions, and were in control of the situation (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B). Further, knowledge is highlighted because it made the government's argument sound reasonable (DK FG 11/12 B). In addition, the government repeated their previous statements which made their argument convincing (DK FG 11/12 B). The same comes with expertise. The age group agrees on the most, but they deviate in relation to the Mink Case. On the one hand, some in the age group express confidence in the government's decision of destroying the mink because it was good for the people (DK FG 11/12 A). It was a choice between humans and animals, and therefore it was okay to do it (DK FG 11/12 B). On the other hand, others describe the government as incomprehensible. For example, destroying the mink caused worries because the 11-/12-year-olds did not know that the mink could infect people with corona (DK FG 11/12 B). The policy makers did not take any other decisions into consideration, for example catch the minks or keep them away from people (DK FG 11/12 B). It was also difficult to comprehend why only mink had to be "killed" (DK FG 11/12 A).

Like the 11-/12-year-olds, **the 14/15-year age groups** are still relying on their parents' judgements and describe their parents' opinion as a truth which means that they "… give the truth back to their parents" (DK FG 14/15 A). In addition, it is emphasised they are unsure of unforeseen incidents, and that their parents help them to make situations transparent. Parents make situations clear and easy to understand:

> I trust my mum, because, generally, when I am in doubt about something or I

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don't quite know what to do, she helps me, and often if I go out, for example, and she says, " you have to wear a jacket", and I say "no, I don't need that", then she is always right, even if you probably don't want to admit it (DK FG 14/15 A).

Hierarchies and being on the periphery of a group create a lack of transparency because the peripheral person does not understand why the others are not letting the person into the centre of the group:

They have somehow not accepted me… it becomes a bit awkward, because you really don't know why they are not talking to you; why they are not taking the next step to include you in the group (DK FG 14/15 B).

Communication, experts, and knowledge on the institutional level are appreciated and increase (dis)trust. For example, the Danish Health Authority (DHA) invoked trust (DK FG 14/15 A) because "… they knew a thing or two" (DK FG 14/15 A). But the repeated lockdowns and opening of society made the age group wonder whether the politicians were just keeping the people in a phase of waiting because the measures were not working (DK FG 14/15 B). In all, the pandemic was unpredictable and had negative effects on the age group's mood: "I lost courage and thought when does this situation ends. When will we go back to normal?" (DK FG 14/15 A).

The **18-/19-year-olds** are broader in their vision towards the world, which affects their ability to see situations through, both at the interpersonal and the institutional levels. In the interpersonal relationship, the age group corresponds with the two youngest age groups' reflections about (dis)trust and transparency. The transparent situations are created because of e.g., long-time friendships: "We know each other" (DK FG 18/19 B), there is love involved (DK FG 18/19 A), and when people act in a crystal-clear way (DK FG 18/19 A). But the 18-/19-year-olds bring in new perspectives on the matter. An interviewee links transparency to predictability. He says that he has clear expectations to how the trusted person will react on things beforehand, even before the situation is happening (DK FG 18/19 B). The age group also differs between family relations and relations with, for example, their teachers. Teachers are trustful because they create transparent situations as a backdrop to their competences. Further, some of the interviewees talk about general trust. The Danes are brought up with high trust, transparency, and continuity (DK FG 18/19 B). It means that many people meet each other in a trustful way and can beforehand predict the situation as transparent. Nothing unexpected will happen:

Denmark is one of the countries that has the greatest trust in our fellow human beings; we leave our children outside cafes, and we leave our school bags in the classrooms while we go out. In other words, we trust each other as fellow human beings. I think this also reflects a lot on the attitude we have, because we have just experienced that we can trust people. I have experienced that I can say things in class without being reprimanded. I have experienced that I can walk down the street for the most part without experiencing anything negative about it. Many have experienced that! … All these experiences, you have had throughout your life and through the society you are a part of … They are also the result

of the trust you have in people and the perception you have of trust, because I think that it is something completely different if you asked someone who had perhaps grown up in (…) the United States perhaps, where they generally distrust each other, I think (DK FG 18/19 A).

At the interpersonal level, lack of transparency as a source to distrust is especially related to situations where the age group does not know a person, or when the others appear untrustworthy: It is not all people who have good intentions (DK FG 18/19 A). Unpredictability is related to different life circumstances:

We have known each other always, but I did not trust him because he hung out with some friends that were not tested… He tells me almost everything, so I know what kind of people he's with, and it's also someone who didn't get tested, and (...) therefore, I couldn't be with him because I went to school and had a job…. Especially, the risk … that I wasn't sure if he was ill with Corona. Therefore, I didn't trust him that much. But I still talk to him, just over the internet now (DK FG 18/19 A).

Regarding the institutional level, the 18-/19-year-olds point out the complexity in some situations. This implies, for example, arguments with pros and cons about what is at stake. They justify the PM by quoting a well-known citation from her in the beginning of the pandemic: "We will make mistakes" (DK FG 18/19 B); "The government was backed up by experts" (DK FG 18/19 B) but they are also sceptical of the measures: "They appeared irrational (DK FG 18/19 A): "The measures were poorly communicated" (DK FG 18/19 A). They experienced that the enlistment of the vaccines lacked transparency, which created distrust because they got the feeling of being overruled. It did not make sense. The vaccines were not the "saviour" (DK FG 18/19 B): "You got corona even though you were vaccinated" (DK FG 18/19 B). They also mention the Mink Case that became politicised. It complicated the transparency of how to make a stand. It was the right wing that was critical. Therefore, the right wing's intentions were not that "clean" either" (DK FG 18/19 B).

The 30+ age groups continue the 18-/19-year-olds more experience-based perspectives on transparency and predictability as (dis)trust sources. In addition, the 30+ have experienced many situations where they have put their trust in people, and afterwards have been disappointed: When one was younger, one was a bit naiver and had a more unsuspecting nature (DK FG 30+ B). Some of them have learned that transparency in an interpersonal relationship is about predictability. From their experiences, they try to figure out what they can expect from others and through that, create situations that can be transparent and understandable to them. They just know beforehand what and who to trust and not to trust: "It is always possible to re-examine whether there is trust or not" (DK FG 30+ B). Or as an interviewee remarks about a friend, he does not trust all the time: "He would sell his soul for his own gain" (DK FG 30+ A). Another describes transparency as an on-going process, where people learn to predict situations based on trust:

We are forced into fewer communities the longer we live; that is we choose who we have contact with and we build up an experience about who is reliable and who is not reliable, and that means that we go from being forced to hang out with a lot of people we might not trust, to actually getting into a community with the people we actually get along with and know we can trust. It is a kind of empathetic radar you build up, right? (DK FG 30+B).

Lack of transparency can be an impediment. If people only take all the bad things into account and neglect all the good, then it can cause people to be so scared that it suffocates them and prevents them from living their life (DK FG 30+ A). At the institutional level, the 30+ emphasise their health care education and network through work as an important background to understand the measures (DK FG 30+ A; DK FG 30+ B). They recognise knowledge and expertise (DK FG 30+ A; DK FG 30+ B). As the only age group, they underline the importance of scientific knowledge and research (DK FG 30+ A). For example, the assembly ban on 10 persons - why was it exactly this number, as the interviewee asks (DK FG 30+ B). As with the 18-/19-age-groups, the 30+ relates lack of transparency to a critique of power, politicians, and democratic process, some interviewees, however, are more critical than others. For example, some measurements are described as "makeshift measures". It was difficult to understand the reasoning behind them (DK FG 30+ B). The Mink Case made an interviewee distrust "the entire panel" (the government, health authorities, politicians, government, etc.). The decision to destroy all mink was made too quickly (DK FG 30+ B). In general, the speed at which the measures were carried out is a big issue to this age group. Notable, the question about vaccines were seen as a threat to self-governance, autonomy, the right to decide over one's own life and personal information (DK FG 30+ A; DK FG 30+ B). The experts appeared insecure. The knowledge behind the vaccines was not confirmed by research. The vaccines were not tested enough, etc.

The 11-/12-year-olds and 14-/15-year-olds have a higher degree of confidence in their parents and the responsible decisionmakers. There is an underlying expectation that their parents and the responsible decisionmakers take responsibility and make situations transparent by taking control, showing leadership, and through clear communication. To the two oldest age groups, transparency is experience-based, and therefore also becomes a matter of education, network, and knowledge based on science. Adults have more freedom of whom to trust and be together with. According to the oldest age group, many of the measures were not perceived as transparent because they were controlled by hidden political agendas.

3.5 Distrust as a protection source

While the former theme was about (dis)trust as sources to prevent problematic situations from happening/prevent someone from doing something unpleasant through the creation of transparency, this theme emphasises the need for protection. Distrust keeps people and society safe from disappointments, loss, harm, and threats. It is a

pro-active choice that people make to strengthen the possibilities of creating reliable conditions in uncertain situations.

Based on the **11-/12-year-olds** reflections, distrust protects the age group from bad people (DK FG 11/12 B). If someone cannot keep a secret, it breaks their trust, since they are not confiding in that person any longer (DK FG 11/12 A; DK FG 11/12 B). Distrust also protects people from being misinformed about a product that turns out to be of bad quality (DK FG 11/12 A).

Many of the statements in the **14-/15-year-old age groups** circle around the same issues as the youngest group; for example, that they see distrust as a protection against bad and manipulative people (DK FG 14/15 A). Further, the age group is especially aware of the risks that they can meet online. The screen allows people to do things, they would not otherwise be able to do (DK FG 14/15 A; DK FG 14/15 B). This emphasises the need of protection and to be critical to people's online utterances (DK FG 14/15 A).

While this age group is highly engaged in discussing distrust at the interpersonal level, they only have a few reflections on the institutional level. The 14-/15-year-olds highlight that people need to trust the responsible policy makers' knowledge and expertise since the situation would otherwise end in chaos (DK FG 14/15 A). In addition, they agree with the youngest age group that trust is a source that made people follow the measures (DK FG 14/15 A), trust stopped the pandemic from spreading (DK FG 14/15 A), and trust in experts protected people from societal chaos (DK FG 14/15 A). Regarding distrust, it is a source to keep the politicians from lying, saying, and doing weird things, and to hinder the politicians from introducing too "extreme" measures (DK FG 14/15 A; DK FG 14/15 B).

According to the **18-/19-year-olds**, trust leads to carefulness (DK FG 18/19 B). Distrust protects people from others with bad intentions (DK FG 18/19 B). Distrust protects democracy and its institutions, and shields people from harsher and more brutal political decisions (DK FG 18/19 A). It promotes a more humane treatment of the population (DK FG 18/19 A). It also hinders society from developing into a more uncaring place, and from turning politics into decisions that only benefit the privileged few (DK FG 18/19 A). Besides the more politically oriented undertones related to this theme, this age group corresponds with the former age groups when they talk about (dis)trust in the measures. They underscore the importance of trusting the government, otherwise, the pandemic might have gone on longer than necessary (DK FG 18/19 B).

As with the former age groups, the **30+ age groups** recognise that distrust towards strangers can prevent something bad from happening (DK FG 30+ A). It is important that people are "watchful" (DK FG 30+ B) and meet people with a "realistic sense" (DK FG 30+ B). It is the safest way to protect people against threats and manipulative persons (DK FG 30+ A) because they can lead people astray (DK FG 30+ A). It is emphasised that people should judge others on a "realistic foundation" (FG DK 30+ B) and thus see if people are trustworthy or not (DK FG 30+ B). You must protect yourself from "being screwed over" by others (DK FG 30+ B). This risk increases when people already trust

someone since they are more likely to trust whatever the others are saying without ever questioning it. In addition, distrust protects people from strangers, for example being cautious of men, not leaving drinks unattended, and never going home alone (DK FG 30+ B).

In relation to the institutional level, the 30+ age groups are more divided in the discussion compared to the earlier themes. To some degree, it becomes political, and more value based to talk about distrust, not least because some in the age groups are against the government and the vaccines, while others are not (DK FG 30+ A; DK FG 30+ B). It becomes a question of values, whether one trusts or distrusts the government and the governments' decisions about the measures and destroying the mink. Some in this age group distrusted the vaccines due to the development being accelerated and not tested thoroughly (DK FG 30+ A). This led them to distrust the people who recommended the vaccines and encouraged them to be critical of the vaccines (DK FG 30+ A; DK FG 30+ B). Because the evidence was lacking, some people stopped listening to politicians and began to seek information from less reliable places which, according to the interviewee, was problematic (DK FG 30+ B). The destruction of the mink is mentioned as a responsibility that the government had to bear due to the lack of a legal framework (DK FG 30+ A).

The age differences are mainly related to risks and what the age groups need to shield themselves from. The 11-/12-year-old-age group differs from this overall picture because (dis)trust as a source is very much dependent on their personal relationships with others, and how others react to them in specific situations. They are still not in a position where they use active protection and are therefore acting on their feelings. This corresponds with the 14-/15-year-olds as well. They highlight their dependency on their parents, and their reflections of (dis)trust still take their starting points in themselves, for example, the risk of being excluded from a community and threats from the Internet. The 18-/19-year-olds are mainly oriented towards the risks they may meet when out at night. They are highly engaged in political and democratic questions and see (dis)trust as an important source to keep society together. The 30+ age-groups use their experiences as a protection mechanism. Although their experiences are individually based, they are all aware of where their limits end; when and how to protect themselves from the (dis)trust source. They have found their political position, and identity with and are critical to how the system works.

3.6 Between trust and distrust – the importance of being critical as part of developing (dis)trust

In many situations, (dis)trust can be too strong a word to use. When our interviewees were asked about (dis)trust in an interpersonal relationship, or towards actors or institutions, they therefore sometimes changed their wording into e.g., "constructively critical", and "critical view". The point is, as we have already stated in Theme 3.2, that the conditionalities of trust and distrust are never absolute and are not two exclusive options. To develop (dis)trust can also be seen as a process of emancipation. The theme

adds a critical perspective to the sources of (dis)trust. It is always good to take some precautions in a trust relationship. "Between trust and distrust" underscores that people have trust, but it does not mean that people should trust blindly. Blind trust can make people misinterpret situations or make mistakes. Further, critical judgement can lead to enlightenment. Being critical is developed through democratic, public, and private conversations, where people do not necessarily share the same perspective on what is reasonable. People can form their own picture of whether they trust e.g., the measures or not. Criticism is constructive, and it strengthens the progress of developing trust.

The theme is not particularly prominent in the **age group 11/12-year-olds**. One respondent argues that it is good to be critical of what the politicians say because sometimes they do crazy things (DK FG 11/12 B).

The **14/15-year-olds** find that it is wise to have a certain level of critical view towards strangers. 100% blind trust is a problem (DK FG 14/15 A). It is also important to stay critical of the government's choices (DK FG 14/15 A) and to people who are in power because it may lead to increased thinking and reflection before starting to follow orders blindly (DK FG 14/15 B). In line with this, it is emphasised that distrust of the responsible actors makes people more critical of their utterances. It makes people investigate what the decisions imply (DK FG 14/15 A).

The **18/19-year-olds** are highly engaged in this theme. They find it important to be critical towards people they do not know, and who have not in some way proved their trustworthiness (DK FG 18/19 A). The age group entails a critical oriented trust towards the policy makers and the prevention initiatives made by the government. There is a risk of becoming 'blind' to the manipulation of those in power (DK FG 18/19 B). Some were sceptical because of the vaccines. On the one hand, they had to 'fit in' within the expectations from society. On the other hand, they are "free" human beings that can make their own choices (DK FG 18/19 B). The difference between distrust and a critical view is that distrust entails a general scepticism towards everything that is presented to people, whilst a critical view invites people to investigate a specific phenomenon, or an event, through reflection (DK FG 18/19 A). In some of the 18-/19-year olds' viewpoints, the prior is bad, whilst the latter is good. Even though they fully trust the politicians responsible for the measures, they are also doubtful because they see the prioritisation of businesses over schools and culture which they perceive as wrong (DK FG 18/19 A). Trust is developed through democratic and public conversations where people do not necessarily share the same perspective on what is reasonable (DK FG 18/19 A). Through discussions, people can form their own picture of whether they can trust e.g., the measures or not. It is important to have an opinion on things, discuss it with friends and families, accrue knowledge. Criticism is constructive and it strengthens the possibilities of general trust (DK FG 18/19 B). For example, their trust in the PM and the institutions were affected by the discussions they had in their lessons and with their school mates. In these discussions, they were familiarised with other opinions, and therefore they were sometimes divided about how they should construct their own meanings: "Where am I in this discussion" (DK FG 18/19 B). Being critical is to be

open and hesitant, not dismissive (DK FG 18/19 B). To wait and see if things are okay; being careful about what is going on (DK FG 18/19 B). This includes reflecting on what is presented to a person by people of power, and by critical research into specific subjects yourself (DK FG 18/19 A). According to the 18-/19-year-olds, their (dis)trust was changed during the two-year pandemic period. But they also point out that it is a part of being critical; it is natural to ask questions about things that affect society in many ways (DK FG 18/19 B). If people give trust to the PM, then there is a risk of becoming 'blind' to the manipulation of those in power (DK FG 18/19 B).

According to the **30+ age focus groups**, (dis)trust stresses the importance of seeking out information, staying critical and making one's own decisions (DK FG 30+ A; DK FG 30+ B). A critical view may lead to deeper thinking, including why someone may have distrust in the first place (DK FG 30+ A). Because of this, a critical perspective can lead to enlightenment (DK FG 30+ B). A critical view is a good thing if it does not result in radical levels of distrust, such as e.g., in conspiracy theories: "It doesn't hurt to be constructively critical" (DK FG 30+ B). People must maintain a critical perspective, investigate things themselves, make decisions for themselves (DK FG 30+ A; DK FG 30+B). During the pandemic, it was difficult to seek information and navigate between what was right and wrong (DK FG 30+ B). It stresses the importance of seeking information, staying critical and making one's own decisions.

This is the most deviating theme in relation to differences in age. To the two youngest groups, the distinction between (dis)trust and a critical approach is not pronounced. It is mainly the 18/19 and the 30+ year olds that see trust as developed through a critical perspective on society. In addition, the two highest age groups are sceptical of powerful policy makers. The 18/19 age groups show a high degree of engagement in society. To the 30+ age group, the critical perspective is more related to life experiences and life choices. They highlight critical attitudes, and other similar designations rather than outright distrust. While distrust is often related to unpleasant situations, scepticism is necessary to protect people, and can work as a more neutral starting point rather than blind trust or distrust.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Meanings and sources of (dis)trust

We have in the background of the four research questions conducted eight focus group interviews, two in each of the following age groups: 11/12 years, 14/15 years, 18/19 years, and 30+. To approach the outcome of the focus group interviews, we have studied the data by using a thematic analysis. With the thematic analysis and the four research questions in mind, we have identified six themes. The first three themes are related to the interviewees' meanings of (dis)trust: "(Dis)trust as a dynamic and reciprocal process developed over time under certain conditions in a specific context", "Ambiguous (dis)trust", and "Moral reflections about (dis)trust behaviour and (dis)trust situations". The last three themes are devoted to the interviewees' perspective on

sources of (dis)trust: "(Lack of) transparency and (un)predictability as sources to develop (dis)trust", "Distrust as a protection source", and "Between trust and distrust – the importance of being critical as part of developing (dis)trust".

From the thematic analysis, we can conclude that the meanings of (dis)trust are perceived as a reciprocal arrangement, where people expect and have faith in the fact that another person will do something for them if they do the same thing in return. It is constructed both within the domain of the interpersonal relationship, and to the actors and institutions who issued the measures. In connection with this, well-known behavioural sympathetic attitudes such as honesty, reliability, empathy, and openness are appreciated. In this context, (dis)trust creates confidence and joy and thoughts of personal freedom and cohesion in life. The opposing attitudes to these are cheating, lying, and being untrustworthy. Not surprisingly, the (dis)trust characteristics are most pronounced in an interpersonal relationship, but it is thought-provoking how much respect and recognition politicians get when they are acting in what people describe as with honesty. Honesty seems to be an indicator for trust, but people do not expect politicians to be honest, so when they are, it is seen and appreciated.

The second theme circles around the changeability in the reciprocity of (dis)trust. Sometimes, the simplicity of (dis)trust behavioural characteristics is threatened by unexpected factors. In these situations, (dis)trust shows a more widespread spectrum of unstable meanings. People are forced to act but become doubtful due to the uncertainty that the situation creates. Especially in an interpersonal relationship, there is more at stake because people expect an immediate personal reaction from others. They are at risk of losing control which is unpleasant and may cause doubt and frustration. Furthermore, some situations are not a question of either (dis)trust or not. They are just ambiguous.

The third theme takes up the normative aspects of (dis)trust, especially related to people's pronounced indignation to certain persons, situations, and institutions. All statements in the focus groups are normative, but we have found reason to include a moral aspect of (dis)trust because some narratives were told with indignation, for example when the interviewees' referred to an unfair situation, or others' unfair behaviour.

In continuation with these three perspectives on the meanings of (dis)trust, one of the most salient findings in our data is the dynamic interaction between trust and transparency. Improved transparency promotes better-informed decisions and increase people's trust. On the institutional level, transparency is created when the government, the responsible authorities, and the experts explain and justify measures, and are willing to answer questions. Unpredictability and instability in the form of the many openings and shutdowns during Covid increases the interviewees' distrust because it testifies to the fact that the responsible actors do not have the situation under control. Further, if measures are perceived as illogical and incomprehensible, it also increases distrust. People must be able to understand why these measures are implemented and what effect they are expected to have.

Another source to reduce people's vulnerability and risks in life is when (dis)trust in-
creases people's ability and engagement in active protection behaviours, especially
when they carefully consider their options in risky and vulnerable situations. One op-
tion of active protection is to be critically constructive, as was suggested in our last
theme.

4.2. (Dis)trust from an age variable perspective

Our theme analysis suggests several age variables in relation to life-span psychology.
The first theme circles around the dynamic interplay between (dis)trust, people's be-
haviour, and personality. All age groups address a connection between honesty, relia-
bility, and trust. There is a tendency in the youngest age group to have more faith in
other people than the three oldest age groups; they are also still very dependent on
their parents.

The second theme is occupied with cognitive development and identity depending
(dis)trust issues. Here, the most interesting age variability is verbalised by the 18/19
age groups. They are highly engaged with the development of their societal role and
possibilities which create a lot of doubt regarding taking a stand in relation to, for ex-
ample, the vaccines. Apart from that, the 30+ age groups abstract logical thinking give
them a better starting point to understand the measures. Their identities built through
their profession, political opinions, and life situations may make them better at com-
prehending the overall life changes that the pandemic caused.

Regarding the third theme, moral judgement occurs in all age groups, however, with a
predominance in the two oldest age groups. If we use Kohlberg's theory of moral de-
velopment as a point of departure to understand our data (Sommer et.al., 2022), the
theory will argue that the two youngest age groups will be dominated by conventional
thinking. They are trustful and are controlled by a wish to maintain rules, create social
harmony, and a good atmosphere. In that respect, our data confirms the theory. The
two youngest groups are mainly operating with moral issues that disturb the social
order e.g., when they raise criticism of people's behaviour, whether it is about public
traffic or politicians. Therefore, it is interesting that we see examples of the same con-
ventional thinking in the two oldest age groups. Despite these minor deviations, the
two oldest age groups confirm a more post conventional moral level. Both the 18/19
and the 30+ year-old-age-groups address their moral thinking towards interpretations
of law and order, depending on their own values and opinions, however with different
orientations in content. In line with this perspective, the 18-/19-year-olds are more
political/ ideological bounded, while the 30+ are more oriented towards the policy
makers actions during the pandemic.

The fourth theme sheds light on transparency as a source to facilitate trust. One of the
most important development assignments in puberty and youth is the separation from
the dependency of parents (Erikson, 1983). It is self-evident that the youngest age
group is relatively more dependent on their parents than, for example, the 18-/19-
year-olds. Autonomy in the meaning of making your own decisions seems to have an

influence on the development of transparency. As part of preventing problematic situations from happening, our youngest age groups thus show a high degree of dependency on other people's abilities to guide them through situations that lack transparency, e.g., to help them to see through information, or to make an overview of what is going on. This is evident not only with the fourth theme, but also with the two last themes.

4.3. Limitations and future directions

The recruitment process has been a mixed solution between the well-known "snowball sampling", Facebook announcements on random sites, and announcements via random libraries. Because of a tight timeline, we have recruited the people that returned our inquiry without distinguishing between people's educational backgrounds. For example, all children and adolescents are from public schools. Another limitation is the method. It is a matter for discussion, whether the method turned out to produce the knowledge that we planned, especially because we asked the same questions to all age groups, even though our age groups are in differences stages of life. For example, one obvious challenge is our interviewees' different cognitive starting points, and how able they are to use logical abstract thinking. For example, our youngest interviewees' answers were short, and they did not reflect on the other group members' answers. If they did, it was mainly to repeat what the person before them said. Therefore, we do not know if they meant what they were saying, or if they had any other reflection on the question we were asking. It means that the strength of conducting a focus group interview somehow got lost, especially with the two youngest age groups. Another limitation is related to the choice of using thematic analysis as the analytic strategy. Although the choice of thematic analysis is well documented, and the six-phase analytical guide is considered as a validation of the research process, we had difficulties in generating and naming themes. The themes thus rather resembled each other.

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5. Taking a Processual Perspective on Trust and Distrust in Institutional and Interpersonal Contexts – German WP5 report

Anne Möbert and Anna Masling

1. The Covid-19 pandemic in Germany

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Germany was in January 2020 (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2022). The pandemic had eight phases (Steffen et al., 2022) (Table 1), the eighth phase of which began in May 2022. The measures taken were determined by the seriousness of the phases, and were often connected to the 7-day incidence rate in the country as a whole, or in single states.

Table 1: Phases of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany based on the epidemiological bulletin 38/2022 (Steffen et al., 2022).

Phase	Name	Start (month)	End (month)
0	Sporadic cases	01/2020	02/2020
1	First wave	03/2020	05/2020
2	Summer plateau	05/2020	09/2020
3	Second wave	09/2020	02/2021
4	Third wave (VOC Alpha)	03/2021	06/2021
5	Summer plateau	06/2021	07/2021
6	Fourth wave (VOC Delta)	08/2021	12/2021
7	Fifth wave (VOC Omicron BA.1/BA.2)	12/2021	05/2022
8	Sixth wave (VOC Omicron BA.5)	05/2022	---

Note. VOC = Variant of concern

An overview of the course of anti-pandemic measures by the German government is given in Figure 1, showing the stringency index of German measures from January 2020 to the end of November 2022. The stringency index is derived from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2021), and includes all containment and closure policies by the government. In general, the German government introduced different measures over the course of time. In the report, we will focus on the most important restrictions that were used to control the pandemic in Germany (Table 2).

Table 2: Overview on the most important restrictions during the Covid-pandemic in Germany based on Deutsche Bundesregierung (2020a, 2020b, 2021a), Bundesministerium für Gesundheit (2022), Deutscher Bundestag (2020), Tagesschau (2020) and Imöhl & Ivanov (2021).

Nr.	Most important restrictions	Start	End
1	**First lockdown:** Closure of schools & kindergartens; contact restrictions (distance & certain number of people allowed); no body-related services	03/2020	05/2020*
2	**Lockdown light:** Closure of gastronomy; obligatory masks in open businesses, schools, and kindergartens, as well as at work; contact restrictions	11/2020	12/2020
3	**Hard lockdown:** In addition to restrictions from "lockdown light ", schools and kindergartens had to close	12/2020	03/2021*
5	**Federal emergency brake:** Contact restrictions; closure of stores; no body-related services; restrictions of leisure opportunities and culture; home schooling & working from home when the incidence was higher than 100	04/2021	06/2021
6	**3G-rules:** Only vaccinated, recovered, or tested people allowed in many businesses	08/2021	03/2022*
7	Tightening of 3G-rules; Tightening of testing rules	11/2021	03/2022*

Note. *Measures were lifted gradually; the months when the first states lowered restrictions are mentioned.

In general, in March 2020, the *Epidemic emergency of national scope* was proclaimed (Deutscher Bundestag, 2020), granting additional authority to the government. Based on this law and the *Infection Protection Act,* the federal restrictions and measures were decided. The *epidemic emergency of national scope* ended in November 2021 (Imöhl & Ivanova, 2021). After the phasing out of the last federal lockdowns, all countrywide measures expired in March 2022, with a transition period until April, but states could still enact their own regulations (Bundesregierung, 2022a).

Figure 1: Development of the stringency index of anti-pandemic measures averaged for each month in Germany from January 2020 to November 2022.
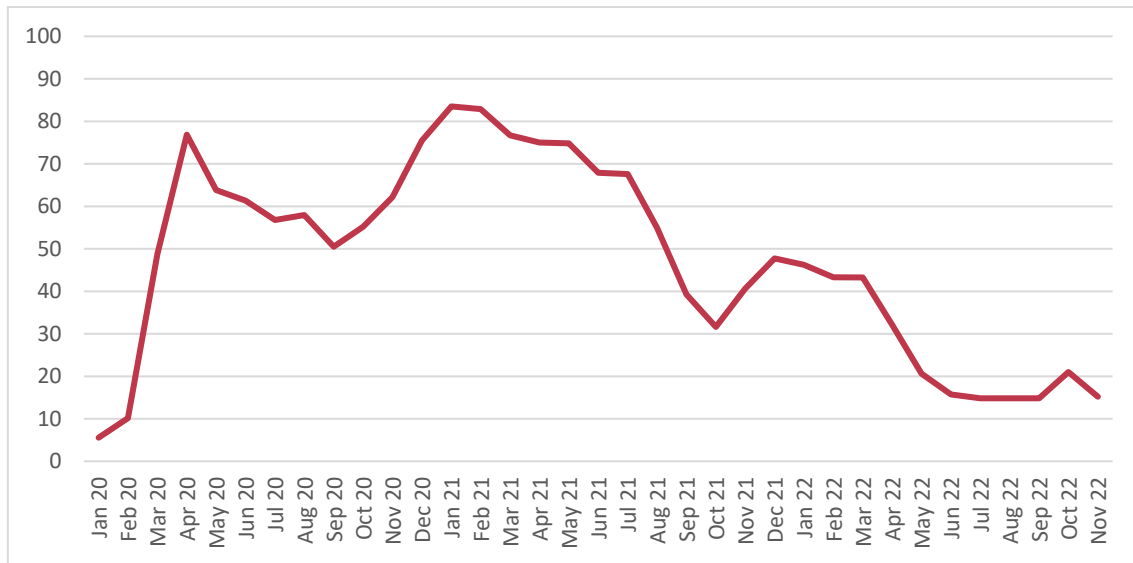
In Germany, there was also a heated debate on testing and vaccinating. The government decided to allow free antigen tests for all citizens once a week, with a short pause from November 2021 to spring 2022. In June 2022, the free testing was suspended because of the excessive costs (Tagesschau, 2022), except for special risk groups. Adding to Table 2, there was mandatory testing in schools and at work as part of some restrictions (Bundesregierung, 2021b; Munzinger, 2021). When the first vaccines were available, the government decided on a vaccination priority order (Vygen-Bonnet et al., 2020). Additionally, feelings of insecurity were provoked by several changes in the recommendations of different vaccines like AstraZeneca or Moderna (Bundesregierung, 2021c; Koch et al., 2021; Vygen-Bonnet et al., 2021). When a new government was elected in September 2021, a discussion began about mandatory vaccination (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022a), which was ultimately not involved in the coalition plan. The debate over childhood vaccination was also highly emotive and resulted in vaccines that are licensed, but not recommended for children at lower risk (Koch et al., 2022), but ultimately ended in no mandatory vaccination for children or adults (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022b). Since there was an ongoing debate about specific rights being given back only to people who were vaccinated, an indirect sense of obligation or constraint (Berndt, 2021) was perceived.

The measures were also partly influenced by some major events during the pandemic. First, there was the foundation of the so-called *Querdenken* movement in April 2020 (Hippert & Saul, 2021). The movement organised a variety of demonstrations against the restrictions by the government. The demonstrations had their climax in August 2020, when demonstrating people stormed the steps in front of the most important political building in Germany, the Reichstag (Hippert & Saul, 2021). A second climax of this radicalisation was when a man shot a cashier at a gas station because he reminded him to wear a mask. The killer stated afterwards that 'everyone who takes part in [the measures] bears responsibility' for the act (Sonnenholzner, 2022). Based on survey data from the Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, Berlin (BPA), these

extreme opponents of the measures were a loud minority. Survey data by Forsa show that in the beginning of 2020, when the first restrictions came into force, 55% thought they were appropriate (BPA, 2020a). This value was relatively stable until the end of 2021, with values ranging from 42% to 69% (BPA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021a, 2021b). Later, the approval reduced to 25% because 53% felt the restrictions did not go far enough (BPA, 2021d). In general, the number of people who thought the measures were too strict varied between 6% and 27% during the whole pandemic (BPA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2022). So, overall, German society approved governmental restriction measures.

In addition, a federal election was held in September 2021 to elect a new government (Deutscher Bundestag, 2021). The strongest governing party in the coalition at that time, the CDU, lost 7.7% of votes compared to the last election in 2017 (Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2022), showing a general dissatisfaction with its performance. A new government coalition was formed by SPD, Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen and FDP (SPD et al., 2021) and new ministers were appointed, the most interesting change being that Prof. Dr. Karl Lauterbach, a health politician from the SPD, became Minister of Health (Bundesregierung, 2022b). Prof. Dr. Lauterbach was visible in the media throughout the pandemic as a promoter of Covid-19 vaccinations, and a supporter of tighter restrictions (Gilbert, 2021).

2. Procedure and participants

The procedure for the qualitative study was predetermined by common agreed guidelines, and was adapted to the German context. Eight focus groups, two for each age group, were planned for digital implementation. In addition, six focus group moderators engaged in the preparation, participated in a training session, and finally conducted the focus groups.

2.1. Procedure

In the beginning, a translation of the demographic questionnaire, as well as the interview guidelines provided by the coordinating research team, were prepared. A bilingual person translated the items of the questionnaire into German, then a second bilingual person checked the translation. Content and translation issues were discussed in a wider group, and adjustments were made to the questions on education and work to match the German cultural context. A pretest (*N* = 4) was conducted with two children of the youngest age group, and two adults. The pretest showed a good understanding among children and adults. Afterwards the translated guideline was reviewed by a group of six moderators who conducted the focus groups. Problematic phrases or incomprehensible sentences were adjusted. The language of the interview guidelines was adapted depending on the age group. Additionally, information flyers were developed for children, their parents, and adults, containing information about the project and its aims, the data collection process, and data protection. An information meeting

was offered, especially for children and their parents, in case questions or concerns arose. A consent approval for adults and children was developed for the demographic questionnaire. Parental consent was obtained digitally at the end of the demographic questionnaire for the children and their parents.

To find participants for the study, different recruitment strategies were used. First, flyers for each age group were posted in public places such as at bus stops, traffic lights, on billboards, and on classified advertisement websites. The flyers included general information about the study, group interviews and compensation, as well as contact information for the moderators of each group. The flyers were also shared on various social media channels, such as Instagram, Facebook, Vinted and WhatsApp, to reach even more potentially interested people. As another strategy, the flyers were sent by mail to sports clubs and schools to find participants for the focus groups 11-12 years, 14-15 years, and 18-19 years. We also contacted the University of Siegen, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce and training associations to recruit people for the focus groups of 18-19 and 30-50 years. However, the most successful recruitment was through the personal networks of the facilitators. Thus, either friends or contacts of friends, or family members of the team members who were not involved in the respective groups were recruited. There were some problems due to no shows, often at short notice and sometimes without cancellation, which meant that some of the focus groups had to be spontaneously postponed, or due to difficulties acquiring new participants at short notice. The problems mainly occurred in the younger age groups.

The Ethics Committee of the University of Siegen approved the project on 14 July 2022 (file number: ER_16_2022). The focus groups took place from August to September 2022 using DFNconf (https://www.conf.dfn.de/) as the platform for digitally conducting of interviews. The meetings were recorded directly via DFNconf and deleted after transcription. A moderator who asked the questions was present in each focus group. The moderator was supported by a second moderator, who was responsible for technical issues, but also asked questions from time to time, and was responsible for the recording of the session. The focus groups lasted $M = 54.17$ minutes with a minimum of 40.63 minutes in one of the youngest age groups and a maximum of 71.50 minutes in one of the adult groups. During some of the focus groups, technical issues occurred: in one group, the first moderator was absent for a few minutes and there were some problems with the audio afterwards; in other groups, some participants had technical problems with the internet connection, or their audio connection from time to time; in one group, a participant had to take part via telephone because she could not get into the meeting room.

2.2. Participants

A total of $N = 32$ people participated in the conducted focus groups. Overall, there was a small overrepresentation of male participants at 53.12% ($n = 17$) compared to 46.88% ($n = 15$) of female participants. Demographic data of the participants and the composition of each focus groups can be obtained from Table 33. All participants received an

Amazon voucher for their participation. Participants in the underage groups each received a 5€ voucher, and participants in the adult groups each received a 10€ voucher. Since the German school system is complex and cannot be compared with other systems, its basic features will now be explained (see Table 3).

The state educational mandate in Germany requires compulsory schooling for children and young people up to the age of eighteen, and prohibits home schooling. Germany consists of sixteen federal states that can decide on the details of the school system, leading to some differences. The school system in Germany is divided into school levels and subdivided into several types of schools. The school levels are: primary, lower secondary and finally, upper secondary. In the primary level, pupils attend an elementary school from grades 1 to 4. In Germany, there is a system for secondary schools (Sekundarstufe I) that is separated into so-called *Hauptschulen*, *Realschulen* and *Gymnasien* and additionally *Gesamtschulen,* which offer different degrees. After grade 10, a general school-leaving certificate can be obtained at all schools, which qualifies students to attend several types of secondary schools (Sekundarstufe II). The Hauptschule certificate (after grade 9) is the lowest school-leaving certificate that can be obtained, followed by the Realschule (after grade 10). If the school-leaving certificate is good, there is the possibility of taking a further educational path and completing a higher qualification at a comprehensive school or a Gymnasium. Secondary level II can be completed at Gymnasium, building on secondary level I. After successfully completing secondary level II, students receive the *Abitur* (A-levels), the highest German school-leaving qualification and comparable to the General Certificate of Education (GCE). After graduating from school, students in Germany have the option of doing an apprenticeship, or to study at a college or university. Apprenticeships can also be started with one of the lower school-leaving qualifications; in some cases, even no school-leaving qualification is required. To study at a college or university, the Abitur is usually necessary, which is why it is also called the *general university entrance qualification*. Studying without Abitur is also possible, but depends on the former education and on the federal state. For example, students who complete vocational training and have at least two years of work experience, are allowed to start a degree programme in a related subject. In this case, an apprenticeship can replace the higher education entrance qualification. The complex German school system was divided into a higher and a lower educational path, where Gymnasien and Gesamtschulen (A-levels) were assigned to the higher pathway, and Hauptschulen, as well as Realschulen and Gesamtschulen (aim other than A-levels), were assigned to the lower pathway.

Table 3: Age, gender, school track, parental education, and place of living composition of the eight focus groups.

	Age	Gender	School track / highest education	Education mother	Education father	Place of living
Focus group 11-12 A (*n* = 4)						
1	12	Female	Realschule (Secondary school – lower)	Realschule & apprenticeship	A-levels & master craftsman or technician	A town or a small city
2	12	Female	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	Realschule & apprenticeship	Advanced technical college & master craftsman or technician	A farm or house in the countryside (rural single house)
3	12	Male	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	A-levels & bachelor	A-levels & master / diploma	A town or a small city
4	12	Male	Realschule (Secondary school – lower)	A-levels & bachelor	Hauptschule & apprenticeship	A town or a small city
Focus group 11-12 B (*n* = 4)						
1	11	Male	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	Advanced technical college & master's / diploma	A-levels & PhD	A town or a small city
2	12	Male	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	A-levels & master's / diploma	Advanced technical college & bachelor	A town or a small city
3	11	Female	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	A-levels & apprenticeship	Hauptschule & apprenticeship	A town or a small city
4	11	Female	Realschule (Secondary school – lower)	Realschule & apprenticeship	Highest education unknown & apprenticeship	A town or a small city
Focus group 14-15 A (*n* = 4)						
1	15	Female	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	Advanced technical college & apprenticeship	A-levels & master / diploma	A big city
2	14	Male	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	Advanced technical college & apprenticeship	No degree & no professional education	A town or a small city
3	14	Female	Realschule (Secondary school – lower)	No degree & no professional education	No degree & no professional education	A town or a small city
4	14	Male	Realschule (Secondary school – lower)	Advanced technical college & master craftsman or technician	Realschule & apprenticeship	A big city
Focus group 14-15 B (*n* = 3)						
1	14	Female	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	Hauptschule & apprenticeship	A-levels & master craftsman or technician	A village

2	15	Male	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	Realschule & two apprenticeships and additionally ongoing studies	Unknown	A village
3	15	Male	Realschule (Secondary school – lower)	A-levels & PhD	Realschule & apprenticeship	A big city
Focus group 18-19 A (*n* = 4)						
1	19	Female	University	Realschule & apprenticeship	A-levels & bachelor	A big city
2	19	Male	Apprenticeship	Advanced technical college & apprenticeship	Advanced technical college & apprenticeship	A town or a small city
3	19	Female	Apprenticeship	Realschule & apprenticeship	A-levels & master craftsman or technician	The suburbs / outskirts of a big city
4	19	Male	University	A-levels & PhD	A-levels & PhD	A big city
Focus group 18-19 B (*n* = 5)						
1	19	Female	Apprenticeship	A-levels & apprenticeship	A-levels & master's / diploma	A big city
2	18	Female	University	A-levels & state examination	A-levels & apprenticeship	A big city
3	19	Male	Apprenticeship	A-levels & apprenticeship	A-levels & apprenticeship	A big city
4	18	Male	University[a]	A-levels & master's / diploma	A-levels & master's / diploma	The suburbs / outskirts of a big city
5	19	Male	Gymnasium (Secondary school – higher)	A-levels & apprenticeship	A-levels & master's / diploma	A town or a small city
Focus group 30+ A (*n* = 4)						
1	47	Female	Realschule & apprenticeship			A big city
2	36	Female	A-levels & master's / diploma			A town or a small city
3	35	Male	A-levels & bachelor			A big city
4	45	Male	Advanced technical college & apprenticeship			A big city
Focus group 30+ B (*n* = 4)						
1	45	Female	Realschule & apprenticeship			A big city
2	30	Male	A-levels & master's / diploma			A big city
3	41	Male	Hauptschule & apprenticeship			A big city
4	31	Female	A-levels & PhD			The suburbs / outskirts of a big city

Note. [a]Deviation between questionnaire and statements in the focus group. The statements in the focus group were seen as more dependable and chosen for the table.

2.3. Data analysis

The focus groups were video-recorded and afterwards transcribed within two weeks of being conducted. The transcriptions were done by one team member and checked by a second reader. A form of smoothed transcription was done based on the guidelines of Rädiker and Kuckartz (2019). Subsequently, the eight transcripts were assigned to two independent coders. The first coder coded the groups of the 11 to 12 and the 30 to 50 years old, and the second coder worked on the groups of 14 to 15 and 18 to 19 year-old participants. The reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen for coding and was conducted using MAXQDA 22.3.0 (VERBI GmbH, 2022). Thematic analysis allows us to reflect on the language and concepts of the participants, as well as on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the researchers in the codes (Brown & Clarke, 2012). After coding the transcripts, the coders exchanged their work so that it was independently reviewed. For codes where no agreement could be reached, a discussion was held with the two coders and a third independent person, who in the event of no consent being reached, ultimately decided.

Subsequently, the themes were built following reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To do this, the coders sorted the codes into higher hierarchical levels. This was done in several sessions by the two coders together, or in sessions where the coders worked individually. In the end, these hierarchical codes were combined at the levels of themes, again in several joint sessions and in separate working sessions. The themes were assigned to one of the coders to review so that necessary reorganisation could be done. In the process, care was taken to find topics that encompassed all, or at least most, age groups.

3. Results from the thematic analysis

The themes identified and the age variability are explained below. Table 4 shows the themes and their related subtopics, and whether they were found in statements towards institutional or interpersonal trust, or both.

Table 4: Overview of the themes and the subtopics in addition to their belonging to interpersonal, institutional trust or both.

No	Theme	Subtopics	institutional	interpersonal
1	Trust and distrust as separate continuous dimensions	Trust as continuum	x	x
		Weight of trust and distrust	x	x
		Concernment	x	
2	General trust	Dispositional trust		x
		Trust in parents and family		x
		Trust as basic need	x	x
3	Trust as vulnerability	Making yourself vulnerable	x	x
		Leap of trust	x	x
		Fear/uncertainty	x	
		Breaching trust		x
		Care for others	x	

4	Generalisation vs. separation of (dis)trust	Trust as multisource construct		x
		Dependence of trust	x	x
5	(Dis)trust as a cognitive process	Trust as decision	x	x
		Trust as consideration	x	x
		Using information source	x	
		Finding consensus	x	
		Positive Comparisons	x	
		Proportionality	x	
		Alternatives	x	x
		Evidence	x	
		Trust as fast evaluation		x
		Trust as information reduction	x	
		Trust as basis for acceptance	x	
		Trust to reduce information overload	x	
		Trust as echo chamber	x	
		Trust leading to selective information usage	x	
6	Cognitive vs. affective sources of (dis)trust	Affective aspects of trust	x	x
		Trust & relationship	x	x
		Communication as source of trust	x	x
		Support as source of trust		x
		Trust as reciprocal		x
		Trust as basis for relationship		x
		Emotional closeness as source of trust		x
		Development over time	x	x
		Trust as diffuse	x	
		Development of trust		x
		Knowing someone as source of trust		x
		Affective outcomes & responses	x	x
		Cognitive aspects of trust	x	x
		Comprehensibility as source of trust	x	
		Logic as source of trust	x	x
		Expertise as source of trust	x	
		Alarmism by media as source of distrust	x	
7	Predictability as source of (dis)trust	Orientation as source of trust	x	
		Plannability as source of trust	x	
		Transparency as source of trust	x	
		Reliability as source of trust	x	x
		Accessibility as source of trust		x
8	Trust norms and values	Values	x	x
		Valuing the democratic system	x	
		Credibility	x	x

		Equality	x	
		Ulterior motives	x	
		Honesty	x	x
		Similar values		x
		Responsibilities of citizens in democracy	x	
		Trust as necessity	x	
		Trust through participation	x	
		(Dis)trust as responsibility	x	
		Social punishment	x	
		Responsibilities of system in democracy	x	
		Finding a balance	x	
		Trust as power/influence	x	
		Trust by seriousness	x	
		Trust through system mechanisms	x	

3.1. Theme 1: Trust and distrust as separate continuous dimensions

Trust and distrust as separate continuous dimensions refer to them not being dichotomous, in that you either trust or do not trust, but that there are different intensities in trust and distrust. The continuum builds between the two endpoints of fully trusting, also called blind trust, and no trust at all, which can be described as a vacuum, without any trust. Where to spot a person on this continuum is influenced by the concernment of the person in the specific topic. This theme includes codes that relate to a definition of trust and distrust. Some participants clearly stated that trust is continuous, or that one can give trust fully, or to a lesser extent. This was mentioned in terms of interpersonal relationships, but also in terms of authorities. As one participant stated: 'It makes sense not to trust blindly or to not trust a little. It just does not go this black and white; one must take some grey' (DE 14-15 B). The participant hereby explains that trust and distrust are not about good or bad, and that there are so many different shades of grey in between – so as colours, trust and distrust are continuous, and appear in different shades. The participants also indicated that a balance of trust and distrust is necessary, as any extreme - complete trust or complete distrust - can be harmful:

> *It has to be a good combination of trust and non-trust. (...) so, because if you blindly trust someone, (...) that's, that's just basically not so good. If someone says jump off the cliff -stupid example- and you jump, then you are dead, if you don't jump straight into the water. So, a healthy distrust is always useful, in order to check: 'Ah, there's no water, I think I'd rather not jump.' You shouldn't have to go through life distrusting everyone or trusting everyone blindly; it always has to be a good combination* (DE 14-15 B).

Trust and distrust were also weighted differently by participants who described distrust as more persistent and weightier, so that 'the loss of trust that comes with it is immensely greater' (DE 30-50 A). However, it was also mentioned that distrust was perceived as something that occurs rarely. This indicates that trust and distrust are, in

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fact, not both poles of one scale, but different concepts that influence each other. Participants described a balance of trust and distrust as the optimal condition. While many participants spoke about their definition of trust, the topic of distrust was mentioned less. Many statements related to the influence of concernment towards the concepts. When people are not concerned or influenced by specific people, rules or measures, there can be a complete lack of trust or distrust, which could be called a trust vacuum. One of the participants described her concernment in political decisions as follows:

> So beforehand, I have to say, there was just not such an extreme feeling of trust, because you were not that directly influenced by the decisions of the government, in my eyes at least. Of course, some of these were extreme restrictions at Corona, when you really had to adhere to certain measures in everyday life or in your free time. (DE 18-19 B).

On the other hand, trust and distrust can become more emphasized, when a person has to think about his or her own trust, out of concern about a situation. These statements about concernment all relate to trust and distrust in authorities, and not to interpersonal trust.

Age differences and similarities. The topic of trust as a continuum became more important with increasing age. In the age group of 11-12 years, the topics were quite narrow. They described distrust as weightier than trust, and talked about the importance of their own concernment. One of the children said: 'I was just at home all the time and that was just a bit annoying' (DE 11-12 A), referring to the fact that she herself was affected by the regulations. The topic in the group of 14-15-year olds was broader than in the younger group, so the topics were more balanced between trust as something continuous, the need for a balance of trust and distrust and their own concern. The 18-19-year olds only talked about their own concernment. For some of them, trust in politics was never a topic before because they were not affected by the decisions. This changed during Covid. Their own concern made them consider their trust for the first time. Most statements about trust as a continuum were made by adults. Their statements regarding concernment were often about the lack of overview, or of dwindling interest over the years:

> But I would still say that I had trust in the measures and the communication. Yes, the communication was not always that clear, especially the longer the pandemic lasted, the more I personally became rather trite, and one was not always up to date, especially there was partly […] you quickly lost track of everything. And now that I've been infected with Corona in March, no, May, I no longer knew, for example, which regulations apply. From when can I start testing myself out [of quarantine]? Because at that time, there was also a lot of new information, and you were no longer up to date (DE 30-50 B).

They also stated that the psychological impact of decisions, the strain and challenges were important to them. One woman said that 'in my role as a mother, I actually found it very stressful' (DE 30-50 A). In terms of the definition of trust, they said that distrust is severe and more persistent than trust, and mentioned that trust is a continuum.

3.2. Theme 2: General trust

This topic describes trust as something fundamental and general in relationships, no matter whether it is with people or institutions. Trust was seen as something that is given from the start as a form of personality trait. Additionally, it was perceived as a basis for human interactions and for a functioning society. Huge focus was given to the relationship with parents, as this was seen as the root of later trust experiences and a natural form of innate trust. Participants defined trust as a need and something to strive for. One participant explained that 'you can get along relatively badly without a person you really trust a lot' (DE 18-19 B). This includes the assumption that there is a basic level of trust that is inherently granted to everyone, indicating that trust is a foundation for human relationships and society. One participant described how she defined this general trust:

> I think it's a little basic trust that you have in every person somehow. You don't expect any strangers directly to scare you, or anything like that. So, you simply trust the people when you go out into the street, that nothing really bad could happen (DE 18-19 A).

This statement shows that our everyday life would not be possible if there was no general trust. This general trust is also seen as a personality trait, so that 'there are always people who trust a person after knowing that person for five minutes' (DE 30-50 B). Part of this general or fundamental trust is the relationship to the parents, which is perceived by the participants as something different from other trust relationships. The trust in parents was more fundamental and natural than in others, and it was given through experiences of empowerment, support, and autonomy:

> And I think that parents are the only people in whom trust doesn't have to build up first, but where it's basically present right from the start. And that's another big difference from people you get to know during the course of your life. That it's much harder to lose this trust in parents the other way around (DE 18-19 B).

Age differences and similarities. The statements about trust as fundamental and general were in the youngest group centred around their parents, but they were not able to give a reason for this trust in the family and parents. As one of the children tried to explain: 'I trust my parents, because yes, because I trust them, because I've known them all my life. (.) I just trust them' (DE 11-12 B). In the group of 14- to 15-year olds, the parents were also the focus and as reason for their trust the children said that they feel like they 'owe' their parents their life (DE 14-15 A). The children also described trust as a need and something that is present in everyone. The ratio changed in the 18- to 19-year olds, for whom trust as a need became more vulnerable, in addition to parents. The family was still seen as a special case, so trust was more important, and the loss of trust carried more weight. The main difference in trusting parents was that adults only spoke in retrospect about trusting their parents 'blindly' (DE 30-50 B) as a child. One person described the development of this trust in the parents as follows:

> As a child, one always needs the closeness. They say that they are parents, they are flesh and blood. I think you trust (...) just blindly, and as a child, you don't

question whether it's right or wrong. Little by little, the older one gets, one then says: 'Yes, is what your parents are saying right or wrong?' But as a child, one trusts the parents (...) one way or another (DE 30-50 B).

The adults talked about a development from this blind form of trust to a new one, and how they understood in their adolescence which factors influenced their trust, namely experience, encouragement or given autonomy. For example, one participant described the reason for his trust in his parents like this:

As a child you always trust your parents, but what still helps me in adulthood is a sentence, which I heard very often from my mum in particular: 'Yes, [but] you have to know yourself.' I have just always been quite (...) - from a certain age-always been encouraged: 'Hey, you have to decide that for yourself.' I could always ask for advice, and I always got advice, but it was always with the final sentence: 'You have to decide for yourself, you have to know for yourself.' And that has always resulted in great confidence for me. The knowledge that, of course, I can always get advice, but at some point, one has to do it oneself (DE 30-50 B).

3.3. Theme 3: Trust as vulnerability

Trust as vulnerability refers to the risk people take when they trust other people or institutions. Trust presupposes that the person does not know in advance whether his or her trust is justified, or whether it will be abused by the other side. Thus, the greater the level of trust, the more vulnerable one may become to the behaviour of the other side. Due to this, the participants described trust and distrust as risks and chances. If they trusted others, there was a risk that they could be hurt, and that their trust could be betrayed. Since there is no complete control over the other person's actions and consequences, distrust can be a form of self-protection, although it can also be a barrier that prevents one from taking advantage of good opportunities. Distrust can be perceived as a form of risk reduction: 'Things like 'Don't get into other people's cars,' you're told that simply because it reduces risk, right?' (DE 18-19 A). Some of the participants even called the weighing of risk and chances 'gambling' (DE 18-19 A), suggesting how vulnerable trust makes a person. They also indicated vulnerability by describing a 'leap of trust' (DE 30-50 A), where they granted trust without knowing how it might turn out. This leap of trust was driven by assuming the care and good intentions of politicians, institutions, or people in interpersonal relationships. Besides direct codes towards vulnerability, this theme also includes the topic of breaching trust and getting hurt. One participant described it as follows:

Yes, I would also see how much I trust a person… trust, because it may as well be that this trust will sometimes, I would say, be abused or hurt. So, and then you stand there. Depending on how much you trusted the person and what you told them, there may be problems coming back to you (DE 18-19 A).

On the other hand, some of the participants described how their assumption of care from the other side had influenced their trust or distrust. This was mainly mentioned in relation to institutional trust. The codes in this subtopic focused on how participants felt when left alone by the government, and how they experienced a lack of help or support. One participant described that 'this also left large parts of the population feeling deserted' (DE 30-50 A). Because of this vulnerability, it was important for some participants that trust is not blind, and that a dose of scepticism is still necessary:

> Trust is relative. You can't take everything people say as: 'yes, they're already right,' but you have to question it. Because we elected them, although we can never know what people are like toward us, that is, the people they need to get into power, or what they're really like. You have to keep an eye on what's happening (DE 14-15 B).

Age differences and similarities. In terms of age, we found a similar pattern across the different age groups. In all groups, trust was seen as a potential risk, and distrust as a form of self-protection from betrayal or getting hurt, but also on an institutional level from standing on the ethically wrong side, or infecting others. In the youngest age group, trust was also seen as a chance, so distrust was also a risk for them. As one participant stated: 'Maybe a person just wants to do something good for you, but you don't trust the person and that's why you don't let it happen' (DE 11-12 B). They spoke at length about betrayal of trust, especially in interpersonal relationships. A quite similar pattern was in the statements of the 14- to 15-year olds. They also added that trust should not be naïve. Their statements focused on betrayal and caring for others. The 18- to 19-year olds talked about a leap of trust and the assumed good intentions of others. For them, trust was also a risk and distrust could reduce that risk: 'And sometimes it's just (...) sometimes trust is also risk, but I think it's worth it' (DE 18-19 B). They also talked at length about interpersonal betrayal. In the adults' statements, we found something slightly different: They also talked about good intentions and a leap of trust, but they highlighted the uncertainty of the situation. This insecurity led them to be more vulnerable. Also, they spoke less about interpersonal betrayal, but more about how much politicians and politics in general care about the citizens. In general, the whole context of the Covid-pandemic was perceived by them as a highly insecure situation, which increased feelings of vulnerability. While some spoke about fear or caution as a positive effect on their trust, others mentioned general insecurity as important for trust and distrust:

> For me, it's always because I've seen that there is a certain uncertainty globally. Politicians put themselves forward and have to have an opinion. And they are briefed on something that either corresponds to the general custom or (.) what corresponds to the party line, or what feels right for them at the moment. But there is a lot of aimlessness (DE 30-50 A).

3.4. Theme 4: Generalisation vs. separation of (dis)trust

This topic describes that people sometimes rely on experiences with similar persons or situations when thinking about the trustworthiness of professions, institutions, or persons in general or specific contexts. This was especially prone in the context of negative experiences, which often led to a generalisation of distrust on other people or institutions. On the other hand, trust was seen as not easily generalisable, because it depends not only on the person, but also on the situation and the context. This means it can vary whether people make a generalisation of trust or distrust versus segregation along sources, situations, or persons, or whether they decide this separately for each person or situation. Trust was seen as a multisource concept, which means 'it is a combination' (DE 30-50 A) of various sources used to assess a person's trustworthiness. Interviewees described that the willingness to trust is not easily generalisable across different people or situations in interpersonal relationships: 'that is just always different with whom' (DE 11-12 B). At the same time, distrust in these relationships seemed to be more generalisable in the way that bad experiences were more easily generalised across different people. One girl described that her past made her distrust most people:

> So, the main person I would trust now would be myself first and foremost and then no one would come after that for a long time, because I simply have a certain past where I trusted people and they just shit on it, like that (DE 14-15 B).

In terms of trust in authorities there were clear decision rules, trust was mentioned as depending on the social roles the trusting person takes (e. g. parent, entrepreneur) or on situations and levels: 'well, I have sometimes trusted them and sometimes not trusted them' (DE 11-12 A). The context was included in trust decisions. Known people or people in the same situation were taken as cues to decide about trust. Distrust was told to be generalisable over people and institutions. One participant mentioned the mask deals, where politicians of the political party CDU profited from the crisis, which was a huge upset for many people: 'So the cases from the CDU are absolutely trust-breaking for me, also in the institution' (DE 30-50 A).

Age differences and similarities. The youngest children talked about trust in institutions and in interpersonal relations being situated. The 14–15-years-old only talked about how distrust is generalisable in institutions and in interpersonal relationships. The 18 to 19 years old didn't mention this topic at all, but the adults spoke about the dependence of trust and distrust on one's own social role (e.g., mother or father): 'in my role as a mother, I actually found it very stressful, because it wasn't just about me, about my health, but also about the health of my children' (DE 30-50 A). They also mentioned that trust decisions are not necessarily individual but need to involve the environment. For them trust was a multisource construct. The most common mention was that distrust in politicians is generalisable. One person mentioned that 'As politicians, for example, I don't want to attack people individually, but in general I say 70 percent to 80 percent they are all like this' (DE 30-50 A).

3.5. Theme 5: (Dis)trust as a cognitive (decision) process

This theme refers to two ways decisions about trust can be made. On the one hand, the participants stated that they have made well-informed decisions about whom to trust. For these kinds of decisions, information from various sources was used and compared to make a reliable trust decision. On the other hand, there is a more unconscious way to trust or distrust. Participants said that they made fast decisions about whom to trust or distrust based on sympathy, kindness, or likability. This second way to make a trust decision was a way to reduce the information load the participants perceived. Depending on the used cognitive process, the number of resources needed can vary. For interpersonal relationships, as well as for authorities' trust, or the magnitude of trust given to them were perceived as a decision they could reach willingly and consciously. In terms of trust in institutions, one of the participants explained how he gained trust in a specific institution:

> So, for me it was then at some point that you had a lot of information from different sources and then, if you had not decided at some point for one source – in this case, for example, the Robert Koch Institute – and said, well, I trust their results and thus also their corresponding proposals for the measures to be taken […] (DE 18-19 B).

For him it was a very conscious decision to trust a specific source and not only the information, but also the proposals given by this source. But the decision does not have to be slow and well-considered, but can also be heuristic and a form of a fast evaluation. Just like in psychological theories of cognitive processes, there seems to be an automated system where people make fast and automated decisions. One participant said: 'I think you recognise very quickly when you get to know a new person, whether you want to trust them at all or not' (DE 18-19 B). In terms of trust, people mentioned 'sympathy' (DE 30-50 A) or antipathy, kindness, or perceived likability as factors for their fast evaluation which was said to be based partly on 'gut feeling' (DE 18-19 B). The fast evaluation was only important in interpersonal trust and not in institutional trust. The more analytical and well-thought out second system from psychological theories of cognitive processes is more about consideration, which means that different information sources were used, and comparisons were made. Also, the consensus of various information sources was important to the participants. The people evaluated the proportionality of measures and used evidence from their own experiences, or from family and peers, to think it through. One of the younger participants described the consideration as follows:

> So, with everything that a government does, you have to look at it afterwards and say, was it really so reasonable what they did? Should they really have restricted certain things so much? That is natural, but to say now that it was (...), yes. I don't know (DE 14-15 B).

From the theoretical perspective in this conscious decision process, more cognitive capacity is needed than when a fast evaluation is used. The topic of consideration was

only used in statements regarding institutional trust, while fast evaluation was only used for interpersonal trust.

A second aspect to this theme is trust as a form of information reduction, which also fits into the psychological theories mentioned above. From the theory and the statement of the participants, it can be derived that trust can be used as a short-cut to decide about the amount of one's own effort required to think something through. The participants described that trusting led to an information reduction because they did not need to think everything through by themselves. One participant described this process using his trust decision in an institution that made proposals for anti-pandemic measures:

> *[…] You would also have to check frequently over this long period of time - which is already two years now - what are the other sources, what do they say? And then you'd always have to weigh things up, and at some point, that's just a bit too exhausting for you, and you can say: 'Okay, I have a source that I trust, and I'll stick to the things that they tell me.' Otherwise, it becomes too much psychological pressure for you at some point, and you can say, okay, I'll just switch off, let them work and trust the results* (DE 18-19 B).

It was easier to accept decisions when the participants trusted, which means they did less research and were less sceptical regarding those trusted information sources. Mechanisms which were mentioned were the fact that trust and distrust can work as an echo chamber where the social context amplifies the existing trust or distrust. A second mechanism was the confirmation bias, which was described as being selective in the information that is taken into consideration, for example: 'Actually, you only hear what you want to hear' (DE 18-19 A). The aspect of information reduction was only found in terms of institutional trust.

Age differences and similarities. The youngest children focused mainly on the thorough deliberations by the second system. In terms of decisions, they spoke about a lack of alternatives and about evidence from close persons as factors of consideration. One participant described how she felt about accepting measures that were not only explained by the school staff, but also her parents: 'I don't have the feeling that they would lie to me, in contrast to just the school deciding that everyone has to wear a mask. […] Yes, so parents and school' (DE 11-12 B). They see trust as a basis for common decisions. For fast evaluation, antipathy was mentioned as an influencing factor. For the 14- to 15-year olds also the decision aspect was common. They spoke about positive comparisons and weighing alternatives. They clearly stated that trust can be a conscious decision based on evidence and consensus. In terms of fast evaluation, they mentioned likability and kindness. In the older groups, the topic of information reduction played a greater part. The 18- to 19-year olds spoke at length about the echo chamber effect, and how trust leads to acceptance without being sceptical. One participant described how he perceived this effect on the example of the demonstrations against the measures:

That if you stiffen your position and say: 'I distrust the government and they are not right', you will end up in circles where this will be reinforced and, as Gregor has already said, you will isolate yourself from your everyday life and your normal environment and common sense, and you will distance yourself from your vigilance, which can lead to problems in your everyday life. And that's why I think it's important to stay open and awake, and not to get stuck on anything (DE 18-19 B).

Trust as a conscious decision was, in this age group, driven by evidence and weighing alternatives, while they also mentioned that trustworthiness can be assessed fast by negative appearance or intuition. Finally, the adults focused on conscious decisions and used evidence, consensus, weighing alternatives and - in contrast to the younger groups - a variety of information sources to make their decisions. As an example, one of the adults explained that she collected her information 'by tapping into different, yes, channels' (DE 30-50 A). In terms of fast evaluation, they spoke about sympathy.

3.6. Theme 6: cognitive vs. affective sources of (dis)trust

This theme relates to factors that influence trust and distrust. Various sources were named by the participants, which could be allocated into two different clusters. First, cognitive sources, which are about logical evaluations of the trustworthiness of people or institutions. On the other side, affective sources, which are a relationship component. Affective sources, therefore, mainly refer to the relationship between the trustor and the trustee, and the feelings involved. On the cognitive side, expertise and knowledge of people and politicians were mentioned most. One participant stated: 'I personally trusted the experts the most, who then advised the government, accordingly, be it the virologists or the Robert Koch Institute, and then really justified their decisions based on their investigations and the statistics' (DE 18-19 B). The logic and sense of the things that were done and the comprehensibility played a significant role on the cognitive side: 'That one could a bit comprehend (…) that led to (…) that one, or that I trusted there' (DE 18-19 B). Further the 'alarmism' (DE 30-50 A) of the media was mentioned. One adult described how he perceived the media coverage: 'We had to be careful because it was pushed so high in the media that people were all afraid of it. We have even been afraid of each other, of somehow getting closer, of talking to each other' (DE 30-50 A).

There was more variability in the affective aspects. Here, the relationship was the main issue. One participant explained the dependence as follows:

Humans are simply social beings and, therefore, it is also important for general mental health to trust because otherwise you are completely on your own and have no one, and that is, I think, a bit difficult, (laughs) to survive as a complete lone fighter as a human being because ultimately, yes: social beings (DE 30-50 B).

People talked about the dependency of trust and relationships, which means that for them, the willingness to trust a person depends on emotional closeness, communication, support of others. In terms of emotional closeness, general closeness was mentioned, but also the feeling of being comfortable around others. This is closely related to the feeling of being supported. The emotional side of support was often mentioned, as one child described: 'Because she has always been there for me' (DE 11-12 B). But helping or giving advice as an instrumental form of support was also mentioned. Communication was the only affective source of trust mentioned in relation to interpersonal and institutional trust. For the interpersonal codes, one focus was on what form of communication is trustworthy communication, such as receiving constructive criticism, clarifying disappointments with each other, or receiving feedback on problems. A second focus was on what communication with a trusted person can serve as a basis for, e.g., the possibility of receiving feedback, but not talking about everything. Institutional trust was seen as the basis for communication, ensuring that one is informed and can freely express one's opinion. Trust and distrust were both seen as a relational basis for interpersonal relationships, which can promote or hinder them. Some participants pointed out that trust for them is a reciprocal construct, or a form of social contract: when you trust someone, you expect them to trust you in return.

The participants also talked about the influence of time, that trust develops over time and how important it is to know the person or to have shared experiences. One of the adolescents described this development from a retrospective viewpoint: 'And then you simply notice where you should mistrust and where you simply shouldn't trust. That builds up quickly, especially when you get a little older, I think you just develop a healthy measure, an understanding of this trust' (DE 18-19 B). Most important for development was knowing the person, with a particular focus on the length of the relationship. One of the adults said: 'This trust builds up over the years. You can't trust anyone from one day to the next' (DE 30-50 A). The participants also described affective outcomes for trust or distrust, which means how trust and distrust affected their mood. For example, they said that 'if you have a bad day, for example, you have someone to talk to and you can trust, then you have a good day again' (DE 14-15 A). In terms of institutional trust, it was mentioned that frustration and disappointment were drivers of distrust in the government.

Age differences and similarities. For the youngest children, the trust was more diffuse, which indicates a developmental aspect of trust and distrust. When asked about trust in institutions, one child answered: 'Well, actually, I don't know exactly […], but actually I would say so. So, yes. So, I do not know now, no idea' (DE 11-12 B). In institutional trust, they focused on the sense and logic of rules and the expertise of people involved in the decisions. In interpersonal trust, knowing the person was the most common response – this might also be a developmental effect. It could be that the younger children were not able to clearly differentiate between knowing someone and related aspects like sharing values, having shared experiences, or sympathy. A second interpersonal aspect the children mentioned was support. A similar pattern was found in the group of 14- to 15-year olds, where affective sources of trust like support and knowing the person were important in interpersonal relationships. Like the younger group, they

also focused on logic and expertise in institutional trust, but less than in the older groups. For the 18- to 19-year olds, the affective part of knowing the person was somewhat divided, so that the relationship's duration became marginally more important than knowing a person:

> *So, with me it's like this: if I'm supposed to imagine a person that I trust quickly, then it's not that I trust a person so quickly but trust simply builds up over time. It doesn't even have to be several years, but simply a certain time that you spend with the person* (DE 18-19 B).

For institutions, the focus was still on logic and expertise. Even if the adults had the same topics in their statements, they had a slightly different focus. Besides logic and expertise, they also included the media and 'alarmism' (DE 30-50 A) in their statements about institutional trust. Their descriptions regarding logic and expertise were more specified for the individual context, which might indicate better problem understanding. One example of these specified statements is the following:

> *There were also questions about situations that gave rise to a certain distrust. In my case, for example, this was the point when the crossing of a federal state border led to other measures being in place, and this was difficult to understand when one had to change, so to speak, on the train: A moment ago the OP mask was sufficient; now I have to put on the FFP2 mask, you have to change because you have crossed the federal state border, so to speak. I found that a bit difficult to understand. This (...) inconsistency then* (DE 30-50 B).

In terms of interpersonal trust, knowing the person seemed to be most important. But knowing people was associated with many different aspects like predictability, openness, or relationship duration.

3.7. Theme 7: Predictability as source of trust

The participants shared light on a topic, which can be described as predictability. It refers to how easily people foresaw the actions, decisions, and opinions of the people they trusted or distrusted. In general, the better the participants could assess those future behaviours, the easier it was to trust. So, this topic is about the transparency and plannability of the decisions and actions of the authorities, as well as their reliability. Predictability played a significant role in the interpersonal trust of the participants. Regarding reliability of authorities, the participants mentioned the change of opinions, the state of science, and the rules. About plannability, one participant described the feeling using her school as an example:

> *And then, of course, you looked, especially when it came to school, what is changing again now. And when something really did change on a daily basis, the government really got to the point where you no longer knew what was actually going to happen the next day. And that was just never the case before* (DE 18-19 A).

This means a transparent and predictable politic is related to trust, while unpredictability and lack of transparency is related to distrust. Transparency was also mainly driven by clear communication and up-to-date information by the authorities: 'But I never had the impression that any information was withheld from me, so I always had a very trusting relationship with the state and federal governments' (DE 30-50 B). In interpersonal relationships, predictability was more related to expectations formed through former behaviour or knowing people. For participants, the term reliability was also a key topic related to interpersonal relationships. A source of this was ambivalence. One adult stated:

> *I think a big point for me when I distrust someone is that the person sends me conflicting signals, i.e., that they are very, very, very friendly at one moment and then unpredictably fall into a completely different mood at another moment. And that just stirs up a lot of distrust in me when I simply can't assess a person, when I don't know where I stand* (DE 30-50 B).

For authorities, it was perceived as distrustful when their behaviour and their decisions were unstable. Reliability in interpersonal relationships was described in a broader sense, and not only as a source, but also as a meaning of trust. As a source of trust, reliability described actions like keeping secrets or promises, and not disappointing someone; the description as a source of distrust is mirroring these actions, and contains codes about ambivalent signals or behaviours. Also, the predictability of intentions and behaviours of others was important to the trust of the participants. They stated that they assessed this predictability by monitoring the actions of others: 'That just by looking at the way people behave or act, you can tell if you can trust them' (DE 18-19 B). Lastly, trust in authorities seemed to have the function of guidance. This was related to security and stability, but also to feelings of hope or calmness:

> *And that was also a time when one - or especially at the beginning - was simply afraid of this uncertain situation and to simply say: 'Okay, so the government has developed measures and we'll stick to them now.' That already gave me security when the first measures came up. Where you could say to yourself: 'Okay, I'm going to do this the right way'* (DE 18-19 B).

Age differences and similarities. In the youngest age group, the topic of predictability was mainly related to interpersonal relationships. They described how it was important for their trust to know how the other person would behave or react. Also, reliability was important in terms of keeping promises and secrets, and not lying: 'Yes, I also believe that if someone, if you know that someone has lied to you before, then the trust in the person is no longer that great' (DE 11-12 B). Also, in the 14-15-year olds, the focus was on interpersonal trust. Reliability was the biggest focus, with topics like keeping secrets and promises, fulfilling responsibilities, or not being ambivalent. They described that they assess it via the former behaviour, or by monitoring current behaviour:

> *So, I would now take an example, for example; if a person tells me a secret of another person, then I could no longer trust him. Because then I would think that this person also tells my secret to someone else* (DE 14-15 A).

A second aspect is orientation. The children said that trust gives hope, calmness, and security. Predictability was mentioned for institutional trust only regarding transparency, where one child had the feeling that the given information was fragmented, and thus non-transparent. The same topics were found in the 18- to 19-year olds, where reliability in the form of keeping secrets and orientation in the form of security and stability were mentioned. The dominant topic here was the accessibility of actions of others, but also their intentions: 'But if you know people long enough and you know, so to speak, what their intentions are, and how they will react to certain situations, then you can trust them' (DE 18-19 A). In terms of institutional trust, reliability was expressed through transparent communication, and negatively through inconsistency, and in general, a lack of direction. Lastly, the adults talked more about predictability in terms of institutional trust, about transparency and reliability. Communication was most important for transparency, while reliability was driven by changes in science, opinions, and communication:

> *The opinions, they are changed too often. (.). If I have an opinion today, I'll forget about it tomorrow. And how am I supposed to have confidence? What I said today will be wrong tomorrow. (.) But I don't see that* (DE 30-50 A).

In interpersonal relations the focus was on accessibility through ambivalence and stability. Predictability in interpersonal relationships was a topic that arose in all age groups, but for children and even more for adolescents, this seemed to be a truly relevant topic judging by the number of statements. Many of them referred to the reliability of their parents as source of trust, while in adults we found reliability as a definition of trust. The belief that one can deduce how trustworthy a person is by observing their behaviour and previous actions was found in all age groups.

3.8. Theme 8: Trust norms and values as sources of trust

Trust norms and values describe the beliefs (a majority of) persons share about the moral conditions that are necessary to build trust in other persons or institutions. Additionally, this theme is about having the same normative basis in a society. On the one hand, there is the value of honesty, as well as the similarity of values necessary for building trust in interpersonal relationships. One participant described the common values as follows: 'I also believe that it's common views, certain values that you share, which help you to get to know a person better and better and to understand them, and that's what creates trust' (DE 30-50 B). For authorities, there was a wider margin of values that influenced trust. In addition to honesty, a negative influence of the ulterior motives of politicians was mentioned. One participant described the influence of those self-serving actions of politicians as follows:

> *I'm not surprised that there's a loss of trust when elected politicians with salaries of 16,000 euros a month simply shove tens of millions of euros into their pockets. I'm not surprised that people say, 'Hey, how am I supposed to trust in this institution?' But then it's just some mini group of people who profits from it* (DE 30-50 A).

Credibility and equality were also mentioned as important values that influence trust in authorities. On the other hand, in a democratic system, there are responsibilities for citizens and government that need to be fulfilled widely across the society to build a trustful relationship between both parties. There is a lack of consensus about whether distrust is a democratic necessity, or a gateway to becoming anti-democratic. The following two statements illustrate this lack of consensus, with the first statement referring to trust as a necessity, and the second referring to the necessity of scepticism:

> *We elected the government, we live in a democracy, so we have to trust that the democracy, the government will lead us through something like this and help us to survive such a crisis, and that's why trust is, yes, easy to say, but also the best thing you could do* (DE 18-19 B).

> *I think one important thing in democracy is that you don't just accept everything that the government says, because we live in a democracy, where you are allowed to say your opinion when you see something, of course not in the direction of conspiracy theories or it's 'like this' and you're all living in a completely wrong world, but just to have a healthy opinion against it and especially to have an opinion against the government is not bad, from my point of view. (...) So, if it doesn't happen, that you then make terrible riots on the streets or somehow riot or something else, because you can also, yes, politically oppose an opinion in a healthy way, and represent your opinion by - I don't know - somehow trying to draw attention to yourself* (DE 18-19 B).

This responsibility to criticise was even expanded to social punishments for people outside the government. One participant described a situation where a well-known influencer was exposed by a satirical show on TV: 'Or somehow the Neo Magazin Royale situation with Fynn Kliemann. He just somehow donates scrap masks. He somehow presents himself as a great benefactor, but is then actually punished by his entire community' (DE 30-50 A). The main duties of citizens mentioned were participation, scepticism and social punishment of people who do not play by the rules. On the side of the government, or more generally the democratic system, the valuing of pluralism of opinion, the balance of interests and taking crisis or problems seriously were mentioned:

> *Especially in such situations, it is important that many different impressions reach the government. That they simply realise that, yes, we live in a state in which many opinions are represented, and, above all, one can draw different conclusions from them* (DE 18-19 B).

Also, the power imbalance between government and citizens, as well as the lethargy and bureaucratic barriers of the system were mentioned as sources of distrust. One

person described a feeling that the government was using force, which negatively affected his trust in the government: 'We were sort of (.) forced to vaccinate ourselves because we weren't allowed in here, because we weren't allowed in there' (DE 30-50 A). The consequence of positive trust norms and values are that the (democratic) system is perceived as legitimate and full of integrity.

Age differences and similarities. The number of trust norms and values increased with the age of the participants. The 11- to 12-year olds spoke about values in terms of authority as a basis for following and accepting rules. One girl asked: 'If you trust them, then maybe it's easier to accept these rules?' (DE 11-12 B). Furthermore, they focused on interpersonal trust, which was influenced by the value of honesty. The 14- to 15-year olds saw trust as a necessity after election: 'So I would also feel it's important to trust the government because it's a bit responsible for the people of Germany, for the German people, and it represents them' (DE 14-15 A). They also mentioned the importance of social punishment and trust as a compromise in democratic systems. Credibility and honesty were also important for institutional trust and interpersonal relationships. For the 18- to 19-year olds, the focus changed because in terms of institutional trust, they focused on the values of the democratic system and how important it is that the government balances the needs and opinions of everyone, as shown in the opposing positions aforementioned. Also, equality was an important institutional value for them: 'Of course, I don't deny that it's important to pay attention to how you equate these things now, so that not everyone is affected differently, but rather a middle ground is found on the whole (...)' (DE 18-19 B). They additionally called for citizen responsibility, so they saw trust, but also scepticism, as necessities in a democracy. Regarding interpersonal relations, they mentioned common values as important for their trust. For the adults, ulterior motives of politicians was one of the main topics regarding values and norms:

> However, you can, well, you also have to (.) simply criticise that. As a society, you simply have to condemn it. You also have to say very clearly, 'No, that's just not how the game should actually be. If someone somehow artificially deducts 50,000 euros because he somehow writes his […] numbers up, then it is simply (...) not fair and just antisocial and to be condemned'. But then, yes, I'll just say that it's also difficult to get a grip (DE 30-50 A).

They also mentioned the power imbalance between government and citizens, and the importance of the responsibilities of the system, like equality and participation. At the same time, they mentioned the responsibilities of the citizens, like social punishments, or the general responsibility to trust the democratic system. Regarding interpersonal trust, they spoke about common values and honesty. Honesty was equally important for all age groups: 'Whether I have the feeling that this person somehow meets and confronts me authentically and sincerely' (DE 30-50 A), while for adults, similarities to a person in terms of worldview, values and interests were also important as source of trust.

3.9. Residual codes

Another set of codes was found that related to the personality of trustee and trustors. While on the side of the trustee, authenticity, dedication and empathy were seen as trustworthy personality factors, on the other side, untrustworthiness in general, and the fickleness of especially politicians were seen as factors influencing distrust. In general, there was a higher demand of trustworthiness in politicians, 'but at the same time [we] somehow deny (.) well, a bit of human weakness' (DE 30-50 A). On the trustor side, empathy with the trustee was important as a personality factor.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The themes presented enable answers to the previously established research questions. First, we will elaborate on the meanings of trust in terms of institutional and interpersonal trust. Afterwards, we will adopt a processual perspective on how trust can be built, and will specify this by explaining the sources of trust and distrust mentioned by the participants.

4.1. Meanings and sources of trust

The results of the focus groups yield a separation of trust and distrust in the participants' perceptions. While both constructs are partly influenced by the same factors, they are not seen as the same. The participants agreed that both extremes, trusting and distrusting fully, are not optimal. They pleaded for a balance between trust and distrust, which was often described as scepticism. Additionally, trust and distrust were not dichotomous, but both seen as a continuum with the extreme points of trusting or distrusting fully or even blind. On the other extreme point, without concernment, there was also the option of a trust vacuum, where people did not trust or distrust because they were not concerned by the topic or decisions. A slightly general trust was described as the default value, which means that people see trust as the basis for a functioning society. As one participant stated, one could not go outside if there were not a form of general trust towards everyone. This general trust was mainly driven by the relationship of people with their parents. The attachment theory (Bowlby et al., 1956) describes a healthy relationship between children and their parents as influential for a diverse set of positive outcomes in later life. Trust in one's own parents was perceived as something different to other trust relationships, like a natural given trust that, as opposed to other forms of trust, did not built over time. Also losing this trust was described as harder and heavier. Based on attachment theory, this general trust is the basis for later trust, especially concerning interpersonal relationships (Bowlby et al., 1956; Li et al., 2022). The definition of trust did not vary between institutional and interpersonal trust. In both cases, trust was defined as a form of vulnerability, which fits Rousseau's et al. (1998) definition of trust as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or

behaviours of another" (p. 395). Also, the positive intentions of the trustee were mentioned as important for the participants. The complexity of trust was highlighted by statements that explained how trust and distrust, and their influences, were separated by the roles of the trustee and the trustor, and in terms of trust in authorities also by level. The participants described that trust differs between people and situations, and cannot easily be generalised. This creates an area of tension because, at the same time, multiple persons mentioned the generalisability of distrust. This generalisability is present in institutional and interpersonal trust, while in the first case a generalisation over persons was described, and in the second, over persons and institutions.

The building of trust was seen as a cognitive process that led to a decision. As in psychological dual-process-theories of cognitive processes (Chaiken & Trope, 1999), there seem to be two ways over which people can come to a trust decision. The first one is an automated process, or a fast evaluation. Here, mainly superficial aspects influenced whether the people trusted or distrusted the other person. It was also named a gut feeling or intuition that led to trusting or distrusting another person. On the other hand, there is the controlled process where the person analyses different aspects before arriving at a conscious decision. This was described by the participants as considering different information, opinions and aspects, and weighing them against each other to come to a justified decision. For the participants, the controlled process was more important, as they spoke more about this. The automated process was only mentioned in regards of interpersonal trust decisions, while the controlled process was mentioned in both cases. An additional aspect to trust as a cognitive process is trust as a form of information reduction. The participants described how their trust led to an easier acceptance of rules and decisions. When they felt overwhelmed by information and opinions, trust reduced the amount of considered information and made it cognitively easier for them to process. But this information reduction does not only have positive aspects, but can also lead to getting lost by only considering selective information and surrounding oneself with an echo chamber that merely amplifies one's own opinions and views.

There were several aspects mentioned by the participants that influenced their trust decisions and the cognitive processes. On the one hand, there was a set of affective sources and, on the other hand, cognitive sources of trust. While the first one builds on socio-emotional ties from social interactions, the other one builds on a rational assessment (McAllister, 1995; Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). In terms of affective trust sources, relationship-related aspects were mentioned, like reciprocity of relationships, informal and emotional support (Semmer et al., 2008), as well as emotional closeness. The participants highlighted how important the developmental aspect of affective trust sources are. For them, relationships and closeness develop over time, and knowing the person was essential to them. Affective trust sources were only mentioned in terms of interpersonal trust, while they were unimportant to institutional trust. Conversely, cognitive sources of trust were particularly important for institutional trust, where comprehensibility, logic, expertise and alarmism were mentioned. Interestingly, logic was the only source that was used in both trust cases, while all other cognitive sources were only mentioned with regards to trust in authorities. In addition to these cognitive

and affective sources, predictability was found to be particularly important to the participants. For the participants, this was about being able to assess how someone behaves, or what aims the person has. They needed a predictable and plannable framework through which to gain stability and orientation. In terms of institutional trust, this was also driven by the transparency of political communication and decisions.

The last set of trust sources was named trust norms and values. For the participants, it was important that there are some values are adhered to, like honesty or equality. In interpersonal trust, the focus was on sharing the same values. In contrast, the similarity of values was not important in institutional trust. Instead, there was a focus on a given set of values inherent to the democratic system and the constitution that needs to be respected by the citizens and politics. On the one hand, this was about equality as a basis for democracy and about the motives of politicians, but it also defined responsibilities for the citizens and the political system. These value-based responsibilities were central to the question of trust in authorities. Democratic ideals, ideals about how a democracy should function, seem to play a key role for trust in the government. A study by Hooghe et al. (2017) found that democratic ideals influence trust in governments. This effect was moderated by the perceived quality of the government. Like Kant's interpretation of the relationship between politics and morals, these norms and values do not seem to be a form of universal morality, but moral in terms of public law (Baum, 2020). Halmburger et al. (2019) identified integrity, competence and benevolence as the three important dimensions of trust in politicians. Those factors were verified by the statements of the participants in our focus groups. Benevolence was found as the responsibility politicians need to fulfil when they are part of the government, not as a general requirement of politicians.

4.2. Trust from the developmental perspective

In terms of the definition of trust and distrust, there were some differences between the age groups, which may indicate a developmental aspect to trust. While all participants had a common view on vulnerability as part of trust, there were some differences for distrust. The younger children had problems defining what distrust means, and stated that for them, distrust is extremely rare, while trusting less is more common. A potential explanation for this finding could be that trust in children is more centred around their parents (Kerns et al., 2007), and because of this, the chances of a breach of trust in an important relationship are smaller, while the chances increase with age. This fits the cultural perspective of trust, which describes that trust is learned in early life through the parents (Dohmen et al., 2012). An experiment regarding mistreated children showed, for example, that those mistreated children perceived strangers as less trustworthy in comparison to children that had not been mistreated (Neil et al., 2022). Similarly, children seemed to regard trust as a faith, while with age, scepticism became more important. The same pattern was found in the statements towards trust in parents. While the younger children spoke about how natural and given their trust in parents is, and how it was hard for them to imagine not trusting them, the adoles-

cents and adults spoke about their views on a development of their trust in the parents. For them, this unconditional trust was questioned at some point and became more realistic. Even for the adults in our study, trust in the parents was always a separate topic that had to be isolated from other trust relationships. Interestingly in terms of institutional trust, we found concernment to be important for the trust of the participants. This led to some statements by children and adolescents which indicated that trust in authorities was not that important for them because they had never had the feeling that political decisions influenced their life. Some of the children also stated that their trust in institutions was influenced by their parents. One adolescent talked about how trust became a topic for her when the pandemic started because for her, it was the first time she had felt affected by political decisions. This finding of a trust vacuum through missing concernment leads to the question of whether institutional trust is something which is relevant for children in general, or if it develops during adolescence when the persons gain a better understanding of the effects of political decisions on their lives, as well as on society. On the other hand, a study by Sønderskov and Dinesen (2016) showed that institutional trust influences social trust in a cross-legged-panel design. Building institutional trust in early life might therefore be a key task for governments in order to create a functioning society.

4.3. Limitations and future directions

The results fit previous knowledge about the definition of trust and sources of trust. Adding to previous knowledge, values and predictability played a significant role in trust decisions, especially in institutional trust. Furthermore, across all age groups, the participants were clear that trust and distrust are not similar to good or bad. Instead, they agreed that both extremes could be harmful, and that a balance between trust and distrust needs to be found. This was often called healthy scepticism, and not trusting and distrusting naively or blindly. This indicates that also younger children have a good understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of trusting and distrusting others.

It was also interesting that both vulnerability and predictability play a significant role in people's trust. Rousseau et al. (1998) described risk as a basic requirement for the emergence of trust. The levels of uncertainty and risk are seen as key factors in shaping situations where trust is needed and built. This contradicts the view of participants who described that predictability was a source of trust for them. When they felt they could predict the behaviour and intentions of others, they indicated that they trusted them more. Following Rousseau et al. (1998), predictability can be seen as an antithesis, or as a factor that conflicts with trust, because when there is complete predictability, trust is no longer necessary. In contrast, some research showed the importance of certainty as a sense of conviction, confidence, clarity and correctness about an evaluation (Holtz et al., 2020). The authors found that high certainty has a positive effect on perceived trustworthiness, and helped predict changes in trustworthiness evaluations. Certainty is also an indicator of predictability, and thus this finding highlights the statements of our participants. This aspect might need further examination and discussion.

Another interesting aspect that was mentioned by one participant and did not find its way into the themes was that our expectations of the trustworthiness of political actors are different from the expectations towards other people. To specify, she talked about how mistakes by politicians were condemned, while they tend to be forgiven when made by people outside politics. Although this different demand on politicians' trustworthiness resonated in many statements, this was the only time it was mentioned as something conscious, and as something that might be a problem, as politicians are still only human. As Hooghe et al. (2017) find, there is a higher need for trustworthiness in politicians than in other people because politicians represent society and make important decisions for the lives of people within society. From a logical point of view, this might indicate that only people who are feeling influenced by the decisions of the government have such high demands on the trustworthiness of politicians. It would be interesting to examine where this higher demand of trustworthiness of politicians comes from, and whether this is moderated by concernment, or the feeling of being influenced by the government or particular politicians.

Further, we also did not ask for the political orientation of our participants (or their parents, for younger participants). There were some major scandals during the pandemic like mask deals by the CDU (Schwartz, 2021) and representatives from the AfD, who let demonstrators inside the Reichstag to insult other politicians (Steffen & Otto, 2020). These two parties are the biggest conservative (right) parties in Germany (Endt et al., 2021). These events might have been evaluated differently, based on the political views of the participant. The emerged dissatisfaction was shown in the federal election where, in general, more liberal (left) parties got more votes in comparison to the previous election (Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2022). In general, Hooghe et al. (2017) showed that people with attitudes on the right side of the political spectrum have more trust in politics. Additionally, Benjamin et al. (2022) found evidence that liberals show more distress when democracy appears weak, especially when a conservative party is leading. No symmetric effect was found for conservatives. These results indicate that, especially in times of an important federal election and scandals, it might be useful to examine political ideologies of the participants. This aspect can be included in further research on this topic.

Besides those content-related limitations, there are also some methodological points to discuss. First, semi-structured group-interviews as a method have some limitations. Interviews can only provide information about conscious or explicit attitudes; implicit attitudes towards trust were not covered by our study. This might also explain why, in terms of trust as a cognitive process, automated processes were covered less than conscious analysis and consideration. In some of the statements, the participants mentioned that there seem to be some sources of trust and distrust with which they are unaware, so they were cognizant of the fact that there is trust or distrust, but could not specify why. This pointed to some implicit reasons. Information processing plays a crucial role in interviews, as the facts described by the participant are modified or changed by their perception and interpretation (Schmidt-Atzert, 2012).

A second limitation of this investigation is the method itself. While there are good and justified reasons to use focus groups in qualitative research, there are also some explorations that suggest that statements regarding sensitive experiences, thoughts or feelings can be inhibited (Kruger et al., 2019). Trust can be considered as one such sensitive issue. At the same time, Shechtman et al. (2009) explains that in general, smaller groups are more suitable for those topics than bigger groups. With mostly four group members in our focus groups, the approach can be considered justified in this specific context. Additionally, individual interviews lead to a broader range and more depth, while focus groups should be used when dynamic interactions are in focus (Seal et al., 1998). This limitation might explain why in general, the topic of distrust was rarely approached by the participants in contrast to trust. Not only is distrust more sensitive, but it might also profit from a more in-depth look during individual interview. Because of this, it might be useful to explore the topic of distrust in institutions, as well as in interpersonal relationships using individual interviews.

Third, the sample is selective. We did not gather other socio-demographics than gender and education, so there might be some restrictions in the viewpoints. With the exception of digital sources, we recruited primarily in West-Germany, so our sample might be unbalanced in terms of West- and East-Germans. Since the people in East-Germany might have different values and the institutional trust might differ in general, there could also be some aspects that were not covered in our focus groups (Terwey, 1996; Kuhn, 2013). A representative survey in 2021 showed that there is less trust in some institutions, especially judicature, the government, and the politicians in East-Germany (BPA, 2021). Additionally, this survey showed, that a larger percentage of East-Germans are critical of democracy. Furthermore, we did not survey if minorities were represented in our focus group. Especially regarding institutional trust, minority status could be a factor for different viewpoints (Schwei et al., 2014; Yeager et al., 2017). East- and West-Germany, as well as minority status, should therefore be included in following studies regarding this topic. Additionally, during recruitment, we noticed two main reasons why participants did not want to take part in our research. First, they thought they could not contribute to this topic and did not change their mind after the explanation that no specific knowledge was required. The second reason was a general rejection of the topic of institutional trust. This might come from a correlation between trust in authorities and trust in science (Dohle et al., 2020). Because of the online setting, there were some further limitations. On the one hand, people from all over Germany were able to take part in our study, while on the other, potential participants needed an available computer or laptop, a good internet connection, and a quiet room to participate. This might have led to self-selection. Additionally, the online setting in some groups led to technical issues that interrupted the discussions, so that some thoughts potentially got lost during the process.

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6. Developmental Aspects of Political and Interpersonal (Dis)Trust: The Greek Case

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1. The Covid-19 pandemic in Greece

In Greece, the first COVID-19 case was reported on February 26, 2020. Greece confronted the first pandemic wave from February 2020 until June 2020. During this period, the level of infection rate remained relatively low compared to other European countries, a fact that could relate to the early implementation of emergency measures by the governing authorities, as well as the general compliance of the population with the imposed restrictions. The beginning of May 2020 was accompanied by the gradual relaxation/lifting of the restrictive measures. However, the second wave of the pandemic, which broke out from the beginning of autumn, and lasted until the end of December 2020, severely hit Greece due to the fast-growing daily number of COVID-19 cases, deaths and hospitalised patients. The country's entry into the third pandemic phase, which lasted from early 2021 to late spring 2021, was not accompanied by the intended enhancement of its epidemiological situation, despite the imposition of horizontal restrictive measures. From mid-2021 until today, Greece has been facing a series of COVID-19 pandemic waves driven by more transmissible and contagious variants; although the epidemiological situation of Greece was characterised as severe, especially during the fourth wave (autumn 2021) due to the increasing number of daily confirmed infections, deaths and hospitalised patients, nonetheless the gradual de-escalation started at the beginning of 2022.

Almost a month after the detection of the first COVID-19 case, government authorities imposed a nationwide lockdown on the mobility of citizens in seven categories of reasons why they had to inform the state via texting: a) movement at the workplace, b) movement to the pharmacy or doctor's office, c) grocery shopping, d) movement to the bank, e) movement to provide assistance to people in need, f) movement to a major ritual, e.g. funeral, g) daily outdoor exercise. In early May 2020, the governing authorities, in collaboration with experts, proceeded to gradually relax/lift restrictions in an attempt to restart economic activities, and bring the country back to normality. However, the entry into the second pandemic phase, accompanied by the widespread dispersion of infections throughout the country, and the subsequent high pressure on the National Health System, entailed the implementation of a second nationwide lockdown from the beginning of November 2020. Schools remained closed and switched to distance learning, despite the initial attempt of governing authorities to keep kindergartens and primary schools open. Primary schools and high schools reopened on

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January 11 and February 1, 2021, respectively, for a limited time period as the advent of the third pandemic wave translated into a third lockdown that lasted from February 12 until mid-May 2021. The end of the third and final nationwide lockdown signalled the gradual relaxation/lifting of restrictions; however, the number of daily confirmed infections remained high during the summer of 2021, leading the governing authorities to implement local, or mini, lockdowns in regions with increased viral load. The opening of schools in September 2021, which coincided with the outbreak of the fourth pandemic phase, was accompanied by the imposition of proactive measures such as the obligatory use of masks, as well as the mandatory conduction of self-tests for unvaccinated students and teachers. In mid-2022, Greece came closer to pre-pandemic normality due to the lifting of the proactive and restrictive measures related to the mandatory use of masks in indoor and outdoor places, as well as the requirement of citizens to present a COVID-19 vaccination certificate in order to access several services and activities.

The prompt and effective handling of the first pandemic phase contributed to the activation of citizens' positive perceptions/feelings regarding the overall situation within the country, as well as the strengthening of their trust towards governing authorities and experts. In light of this framework, the findings of diaNEOsis' survey (2020), that took place during the first pandemic wave, i.e., from April 8 to 15, 2020, indicated that 85.7% of Greeks believed that things were going in the right direction. Moreover, Greeks were mainly characterised by positive feelings, i.e., optimism (30%), security (25.5%), pride (23.7%) and confidence (17.8), whereas 30.9% of respondents stated the feeling of insecurity (though on a downward trend, compared to 38% in December 2019). The above findings were accompanied by the notable enhancement of citizens' trust in several institutions, such as the government (64.6%), the Prime Minister (69.7%) and the scientists/technocrats (85%). However, the findings of the second wave of diaNEOsis' survey (2020) that rolled from September 15 to 22, 2020, demonstrated that 56.6% of Greeks believed that things were going in the right direction while the dominant feelings had changed compared to the results of the previous wave; respondents were mainly characterised by uncertainty (20.7%), insecurity (16.2%) and anxiety (11.5%) during the second pandemic phase, while citizens' trust in scientists presented a noteworthy decrease (57.6%) in comparison with the corresponding finding in April 2020. The third wave of diaNEOsis' survey (2020) took place from December 1 to 10, 2020 focusing, among others, on the investigation of citizens' views and stances on the vaccination against COVID-19. More specifically, citizens' perceptions on the country's overall situation did not present any remarkable change compared to October 2020. At the same time, the level of citizens' trust in government and experts in dealing with the pandemic remained stable and relatively high. With regard to the vaccination topic, 59.1% of Greeks stated that they trust vaccines in general, while 66.3% of them were considering getting vaccinated against COVID-19. The following three waves of diaNEOsis' survey, covering the period from March 2021 until December 2021, did not demonstrate any notable fluctuations in the views and stances of Greek citizens. The rate of the positive evaluation of the country's general situation noted a slight downswing compared to December 2020, however, it remained stable

until the end of 2021. The level of citizens' trust in government, experts and vaccines did not present noteworthy changes in comparison with the previous two waves, whereas the dominance of negative feelings, e.g., uncertainty, insecurity, anxiety and disappointment, could be interrelated with the general fatigue caused by the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic.

From mid-summer of 2022 until September 2022, Greece experienced a distinct de-escalation in its epidemiological situation in terms of COVID-19 weekly confirmed cases, deaths and hospitalised patients. Greece returned to normality almost two years after the onset of the pandemic, maintaining, however, a few preventive measures relevant to the obligatory use of masks on public transportation, as well as the mandatory implementation of a weekly rapid antigen tests, for unvaccinated employees, in order to access their workplace.

2. Procedure and participants

2.1. Procedure

The research design, the consent forms and the information brochures for the participants of the focus groups were submitted to the Ethics Committee of Panteion University, and ethical approval was granted in June 2022 (case file number 27/6-6-22) without any concerns from the Ethics Committee.

Following the research design, and in order to test the interview guidelines, we conducted two pretest interviews with minors. Before the interviews, a researcher of the team translated the interview guidelines and the socio demographics questionnaire into Greek, and we recruited two minors from among personal acquaintances of the research team. We recruited an 11-year-old boy and a 15-year-old girl, with whom we conducted individual interviews via an online platform. The questions were well understood by the two participants, and no concerns were raised regarding the questionnaire. The interviews were very informative, especially regarding the impact of the pandemic on young children.

To recruit participants, the snowball strategy was followed, where after the initial recruitment of participants through social contacts of the research team, participants suggested to other individuals until the number of participants for each focus group was finalised. Participants, after indicating their availability, received the informed consent form, together with a questionnaire of their socio-demographic characteristics via email contact, which should have been completed before the focus groups started. In the case of minors, both the informed consent form and the questionnaire were completed by both parents of each minor participant.

The focus groups took place between July and October 2022 via popular online video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom or Google Meet, with the participation of 2 or 3 members of our research team at a time. One member conducted the focus group and naturally participated actively in the discussion, while a second member had the task

of looking at the discussion guide in parallel, ensuring coverage of all the topics, and participating only in rare cases and/or if it was deemed critical; in the cases where there was a third member, this member also had the corresponding task of looking at the discussion guide for any omissions, and also dealing with the technical issues of recording the focus group if there were technical problems with the connection, sound, video, etc. The duration of the focus groups ranged from 30 minutes to 98 minutes, with an average time of 63.25 minutes, as you can see in detail in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Time length of each focus group

Focus Group	Duration in minutes
11-12A	54
11-12B	30
14-15A	43
14-15B	72
18-19A	98
18-19B	71
30+A	65
30+B	73
Mean time	63.25 minutes

2.2. Participants

A total of 37 people participated in all focus groups and across the various age groups. Among them, 22 were female and 15 were male. Male participation was lower in the older age groups, as is detailed in the table below showing the socio-demographic data collected for all participants by focus group.

Table 2. Number of participants in each FG by gender and age

Age group	Number of Participants	Female	Male
11-12	9	4	5
14-15	10	6	4
18-19	9	6	3
30+	9	6	3
Total	37	22	15

Table 3. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

	Age	Gender	School track / highest education	Education mother	Education father	Place of living
Focus group 11-12 A (n = 5)						
1	12	Male	Public Elementary School	University or College	University or College	A big city
2	12	Female	Private Elementary School	University or college	University or college	A big city
3	12	Male	Public Elementary School	University or College	University or college	A big city
4	12	Male	Public Elementary School	University or college	University or College	A big city
5	12	Male	Public Elementary School	University or College	University or College	A big city
Focus group 11-12 B (n = 4)						
1	11	Female	Public Elementary School	University or College	University or College	A big city
2	11	Male	Public Elementary School	University or College	University or College	A big city
3	12	Female	Public Middle High School	University or College	High School	A big city
4	12	Female	Public Elementary School	University or College	University or College	A big city
Focus group 14-15 A (n = 5)						
1	14	Female	Public Middle High School	University or College	University or College	A big city
2	14	Male	Model/Experimental Middle High School	University or College	University or College	A big city
3	15	Female	Public High School	University or College	High School	A big city
4	15	Male	Public High School	University or College	University or College	In a village
5	15	Female	Public High School	High School	High School	A big city

Focus group 14-15 B (n = 5)						
1	14	Female	Model / Experimental Middle High School	University or College	University or college	A big city
2	14	Female	Public Middle High School	University or College	High School	A big city
3	14	Male	Private Middle High School	University or College	University or College	A big city
4	14	Male	Private Middle High School	University or College	University or College	A big city
5	14	Female	Model / Experimental Middle High School	High School	University or College	A big city
Focus group 18-19 A (n = 4)						
1	18	Female	Model / Experimental High School	High School	High School	A big city
2	19	Male	Vocational High School	University or College	University or College	In a village
3	18	Female	Public High School	University or College	High School	A big city
4	18	Female	Model / Experimental High School	University or College	University or College	Suburbs of a big city
Focus group 18-19 B (n = 5)						
1	18	Male	Public High School	High School	Middle High school	In a village
2	18	Female	Public High School	High School	High School	A big city
3	19	Female	Public High School	University or College	High School	A big city
4		Male	NA	NA	NA	NA
5		Female	NA	NA	NA	NA
Focus group 30+ A (n = 5)						
1	43	Female	University or College			A big city

2	48	Male	University or College			A big city
3	41	Female	University or College			Suburbs of a big city
4	41	Female	University or College			Small town
5	64	Male	University or College			A big city
Focus group 30+ B (n = 4) Trans08						
1	53	Female	High School			A big city
2	58	Male	High School			A big city
3	36	Female	University or College			A big city
4	38	Female	University or College			Small town

2.3. Data analysis

Two of our researchers in the team were responsible for the transcription of the focus groups, and each one conducted four transcriptions. When the transcription was finished, we started a multi-stage coding process following the method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). In the first stage, a researcher conducted open coding in all focus groups, and created the first cycle of coding. In the second stage, four researchers (including the one who conducted open coding) coded the transcribed documents according to the preliminary codebook, but they were also free to add codes. Each age group was assigned to each of the four researchers to be coded. After the completion of open coding, in the third stage, the researcher that designed the preliminary codebook merged all codebooks and refined data analysis, thus creating a final summarised codebook. In the fourth stage, we used the top-down approach, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006: 8–9), in order to create themes that will answer our research questions. In this stage, two of the researchers created the themes and the codes that form them, and a third researcher evaluated the themes, discussed with the researchers and they all agreed on the final version of themes and coding. Our main concern was to create themes broad enough to include attitudes and opinions from all age groups of participants, and then to allocate the differences between age groups. Since our focus of research is on trust, we wanted to examine how trust develops in different stages of life, and identify the factors that define the meaning of trust in these life stages.

3. Results from the thematic analysis

From the thematic analysis of our data, we constructed six themes that answer two main research questions. The first research question concerns the conceptualisation of (dis)trust in the institutional and interpersonal contexts, and consists of two broad themes:

i) (Dis)trust developed by circumstances and context

ii) (Dis)trust as a general stance and attitude

The second research question seeks to explore the factors that influence (dis)trust and consists of four themes:

i) The effects of life experiences

ii) Reciprocal (dis)trust

iii) Predictability as source of (dis)trust

iv) Development of (dis)trust through time

3.1. Theme 1: (Dis)trust developed by circumstances and context

This theme refers to the specific context in which citizens develop trust or distrust, and is strongly connected with specific elements of trust, like sincerity, honesty, knowledge, etc. The main criterion that characterises this theme is the assessment of specific situation/crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003). In this case, the respondents refer to the specific circumstances, and the general context of the crisis by making evaluations according to governmental policies. It is also interesting that the period of the pandemic was experienced by all participants in a different way but they were all able to make assessments, since the consequences of the pandemic and the measures followed affected everyone.

The first condition regarding trust is the one of necessity. Most of the respondents felt exposed to the unknown caused by the global pandemic, and their instant reaction to that was trust in those in charge because 'they know better'. Society was faced with something new for which they felt they should trust the experts that advise the government. Most of the countries around the world followed the same strategy against COVID-19, and the majority of citizens obeyed measures implemented by the governments. For some respondents, this was not a matter of trust, but the logical thing to do without having any other choice:

> There was trust, not trust but rather obedience, that this should be done. We all have to stay inside, avoid contact, we all understood that. We know five or ten things about diseases now, we don't live in the Middle Ages, or in 1910 with the Spanish flu. We know how we infect each other, how colds and airborne viruses spread, so we kept distance. It wasn't a matter of trust, it was a matter of logic, that this should be done (GR 30+ B).

Interestingly enough, we observed a close connection between trust as a necessity, and the belief that the measures were taken by a combination of actors, that is to say,

the Greek government, the advisory committee of experts, the European Union, and in some cases with guidelines from the World Health Organisation. Although this trusting condition seems to be a desperate one, there was also present rationality in the assessment of the situation; many of the respondents considered that the most logical behaviour in an unknown and dangerous situation was to trust those in charge. The main components of trust concerning the respondents' own emotions were necessity, fear of the unknown, and a sense of safety that was the outcome of the collaboration of experts with the government:

> *In the first quarantine, everything was stricter, we felt a pressure, a fear of the unknown, but at the same time it made us endure a little bit more. I have the feeling that when something is new, it doesn't let you have time to immerse yourself in it, so we felt somewhat safe in that we were protected in this way* (GR 30+ B).

> *Okay, and I don't think we had any choice but to trust them because they were supposed to know more than us because we didn't understand much then either* (GR 14-15 A).

Moreover, there were elements of trust that concerned the characteristics the respondents attributed to those in charge, like expertise on the matter, and knowledge regarding the medical components of COVID-19. For younger cohorts, trust was given since they thought that the only thing the decision makers had in mind was the good of the people:

> *Weighing the limitations of the national health care system, what needed to be done because we were going to collapse by not knowing, not having protocols, not having drugs, logic says yes, you assess and you trust. Partly because you have to, because it's an emergency. Partly because their measures made sense, and they had very good scientists up front. Trust was something they had from me* (GR 30+ B).

> *I trusted them because they were experts in this matter, that's why* (GR 11-12 A).

> *Of course, I trust them because they are doing all this for us, for our protection* (GR 11-12 B).

On the other hand, distrust was also apparent and very strong, especially for the older cohorts when they were assessing the government. In this case, again the condition of the pandemic was unique, but also it was dealt with as another crisis that the state mechanism should control, and so criticism was unavoidable. The main element of distrust in this case was the ambivalence of the measures taken for the control of the pandemic. Close to the majority of respondents condemned the back and forth of the decisions regarding quarantine, the use of masks, the opening of schools, or the welcoming of tourists during the summer:

> *I don't remember there being any signs of trust from me. It was just distrust. During the first quarantine, everyone said with this logo, "We're staying home" and when we were going out, we were wearing a mask and the World Health Organisation had already said that masks are not useful and it's not good to wear masks* (GR 18-19 B).

Among the general criticism regarding the ambivalence of measures, some of the respondents attributed blame to those in power because of insincerity, dishonesty and suspicion of corruption. They felt that people were not informed properly about the reasoning of the measures, or the decisions to revoke them. They acknowledged that decision making during COVI-19 had to include in the planning not only health protection issues, but also the economic and social implications of measures; also, the government had to be honest and sincere with the people and explain every decision:

> *I feel that trust has been lost since there is no honesty, and there is no inclination from the people who make such decisions to go through the process of explaining the reasons and factors that led us to any decision* (GR 18-19 B).

There were also respondents who were more suspicious about the motives of the decision makers. They believed that the measures taken for the protection from COVID-19 had financial implications--they had profit-driven motives, profit for the pharmaceutical companies and for some politicians. In some cases, this reasoning included a general conspiracy from the political system and the media as a means to manipulate people and silence them:

> *We have long been living in an era of questioning of institutions, in general. Questioning in general is fertile and I think this time it is urgent. What happened with the Coronavirus for me is the peak, so to speak, is the peak that we were all tested, because it was a battle between the common good and personal choice. At a time when for a long time now there has been intense doubt about everything. And even at this critical moment, how can you trust? You couldn't trust. When we already live in an age of misinformation, with a strong element of it for the pursuit of profit that the televisions now can pass you anything, let alone in this period we were living in that they could pass what they wanted, so it is good to have doubt, I believe this and at this time, there was intense distrust (GR 30+ A).*

On the other hand, when it comes to **interpersonal relationships**, the context of trust is shaped by personal characteristics and the development or closeness of these relationships. Trust is attributed according to personality traits, meaning that people tend to trust those who they think have the knowledge and expertise to support them and help them in critical times:

> *I trust this person because I trust her knowledge, her opinion and I know that she will always support me and help me in whatever I need, and in the right direction. She will help me to solve the problem from my point of view (GR 30+ B).*

Apart from this rationality, emotional aspects are also important. Respondents trust their family unconditionally because they believe that there is benevolence, love, support and care. So, whatever happens, they will have a person they can rely on, without criticism. Moreover, some respondents declared that in interpersonal relationships, it is easier to express distrust because they feel confident enough to do so since they expect understanding from their loved ones. In other words, when they express their distrust on some issues, they are certain that this will lead to reconsideration and a fruitful discussion:

I trust my parents most because - and my friends of course - but my parents have been there since day one, and I think they want my best interest more than anyone else, so I don't have anyone else I trust more than them (GR 11-12 A).

For me, in this part of trust and distrust, my view of my close ones is a little different from my view of the political scene. Perhaps I feel more trust for the people in my environment than I do for the political part. I'm definitely one of those people who is skeptical of some of my own people's stuff, but I feel pretty good about it. I mean, it's also a matter of trust at the same time, because I feel like I can express it, I mean people around me give me the opportunity to express my distrust and make this part of a conversation. In general, I trust them and when I am distrustful of them, I feel good (GR 30+ B).

Age differences: The most striking difference between different age groups in this theme concerns the almost unconditional trust and the absence of any type of suspicion that the younger respondents, especially those aged from 11 to 12, attributed to the decision makers. Their way of thinking reflects their age; they are certain that those in charge are benevolent and that their only concern is the public good. They are also very obedient, and although the measures taken for the protection from the virus affected their schooling and social life excessively, they accepted it because they were certain that this was the way to get through the situation. In contrast, at the interpersonal level, the youngest age group trusts their close ones more critically and after proven credibility. In this case, those between 11 and 12 consider trust as a type of confidentiality. They usually refer to close friends in whom they can confide personal situations and their fear of betrayal. One explanation of this inconsistency of the criteria of political and interpersonal trust in young cohorts could be the environment of socialisation. These days, children are very much affected by their family and school. They still live in micro environments, and they have to obey rules imposed by older people who act in their best interest. This is not surprising since most of the research acknowledges the impact of the early years of socialisation and the environments in which people grow up (Corsaro and Fingerson, 2006; Niemi and Sobieszek, 1977). At the interpersonal level of trust, it is interesting that from a psychological perspective, we observe the initial form of a micro society where children develop personal relationships with others outside their comfort zone of family, and this makes them more critical or more able to assess different situations.

3.2. Theme 2: Critical (dis)trust as a general stance and attitude

This theme refers to trust or distrust as a constant situation of assessment or healthy skepticism (Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003; Walls et al., 2004) that is also a personality trait. It can be described as a more rational attitude, and is more common in older cohorts. It is described as a natural attitude and is common both in political and interpersonal trust. Those who believe in critical trust, acknowledge the saliency of a person's knowledge and information around different aspects of the political and social arena; the goal must always be the search for different views on a subject, and the ability to assess them. The argument behind critical trust as a personality trait is not suspicion, but a more rational view of adequately informed citizens who are more skeptical and develop a healthy type of distrust:

I think we should be a little skeptical of what someone tells us. And if you like, not skeptical, but properly informed. When someone tells us something, good or bad, they have the power and they impose it on us. Whether we agree or disagree, we have to be properly informed (GR 18-19 A).

Moreover, critical trust is also seen as the counterpart of blind trust. Respondents consider blind trust as not only harmful for the political system, but for interpersonal relationships, as well. Critical trust allows people to search for further knowledge and assessment, but it also provides useful tools for the functioning of democracy. They understand critical trust as a means of assessment that will help the political system to improve through the feedback of people's appraisal:

Criticism of power and of these mass and oppressive decisions is always good. To criticise, to see what is happening, not to be blind to what you hear because you are afraid of dying, to know what is going on and next door, what the agenda is. That they want to teach you to restrict your freedoms and not to protest because you have to, for your own good (GR 30+ B).

Moreover, trust and distrust can be seen as the different outcomes of citizens' assessment. In the abovementioned cases, criticism and appraisal were present, but in the context of insecurity and the unknown; for some of the respondents, trust was the only alternative. They trusted the experience and knowledge of the experts, and the will for the general good by the political system. On the other hand, criticality and appraisal lead to doubt, dispute and finally distrust. This was a two-factor phenomenon with similar ideas behind the resonance of distrust. First, the condition of the pandemic and the strict measures taken by the government led to contesting attitudes about the restrictions and the effectiveness of the measures taken:

I think what the government wanted to gain was to put the blame on citizens for its own mistakes, so that it could then be re-elected. As far as the Greek state in general is concerned, it is that there was a weakness, and combined with the climate of fear that existed, we were losing our trust again and again (GR 18-19 A).

Second, for some, distrust was already intense and pre-existed as a general stance to the political system in the past years. Many people reacted to the measures of quarantine, and others had serious doubts about the vaccines and the existence of the pandemic. They perceived all these measures as a means of control and restriction by the political system, as something cognitively planned by the government in order to be able to misguide and control the people:

We have long been living in an era of questioning of institutions, in general. Questioning is fruitful and I think this time, it is compelling. What happened with the Coronavirus for me is the peak that tested us all, because it was a battle between the common good and personal choice. At a time when for a long time now there has been intense doubt about everything. And even at this critical moment, how can you trust? You couldn't trust. When we already live in an age of misinformation, with a strong element of chasing profit, when the TV now can pass anything to us, so it's good to have doubt, that's what I believe, and at this time there was profound distrust (GR 30+ A).

In general, critical (dis)trust is considered a positive and beneficial attitude by most of the respondents. It allows people to extend their knowledge and react to what they believe is wrong, but their objections must be fruitful and bound to solid arguments. On the contrary, if a critical stance leads to doubtful and unreasonable behaviour, then it can only cause damage and chaos. Moreover, some respondents consider the way of expressing doubt and criticism as salient. They condemn violent practices and praise fruitful critique:

> *Trust is important because without trust, there can be no bonds between citizens, there can be no bonds between the citizen and the State, so doubt is a good thing, but only to the extent that it allows us to develop our critical thinking* (GR 18-19 B).

It is equally beneficial to both trust and criticise. Distrust or criticising is more beneficial than trusting. I mean, it can evolve a situation more, but it has a lot to do with how you express distrust and trust. If I express my distrust by being violent, there is no point. The ideal is to criticise followed by a corresponding respect for the decision makers. They have the hard part, that's the truth (GR 30+ B).

In terms of **interpersonal relationships**, critical (dis)trust takes the form of retrospective assessment of behaviour. Thus, the main characteristics the respondents attribute to their close ones concerning critical trust, have a cognitive base of reliability and honesty and a behaviour-dependent practice; a person must prove they can be trusted through their actions, like keeping secrets, being supportive and providing accurate knowledge:

> *I wouldn't say that it's bad to trust the other person, but there should be some criterion that you set for yourself, with your experiences and what you've been through. From there you would know if you can trust him or not* (GR 14-15 B).

> *Trust, or lack of trust, is not something that is unaffected by circumstances. That is, trust or lack of trust, is not something that is in a test tube. Always trust, or lack of trust, is dependent on circumstances. When conditions are good, we have trust; when conditions tend towards bad, it slowly falls* (GR 30+ B).

Another aspect of interpersonal critical distrust is related to the reformative role it can play, and is opposed to blind trust. Some of the respondents believe that the expression of doubt and criticism to people they generally trust can improve situations, making people reconsider their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours:

> *If the other person realises that there is mistrust, they may turn to a process of introspection and see that some things are wrong and can possibly be improved. In other words, distrust, and especially criticism, is a very good means of improvement and self-improvement, since we are talking about a social circle* (GR 18-19 A).

Age differences: there is a fundamental difference between the younger age groups of 11-15 and the older ones of 18+ that concerns their experiences with the political system. Since they have limited experiences with political decisions, they usually express a more affective attitude towards decision makers, and tend not to consider any bad or harmful intentions (Rotenberg, 2010). Their criticism is restricted to some measures taken during the pandemic that caused them to feel stressed. On the other

hand, older cohorts have already formed their political attitudes, and tend to consider critical (dis)trust as a healthy reaction in a democratic system. They can make assessments based not only on knowledge, but also on previous actions. In terms of interpersonal trust, reliability and trustworthiness are the criteria that all cohorts refer to as components of trust, since most of them experience personal relationships with friends and family. To conclude, the differentiating factor between the younger and older age groups regarding political and interpersonal trust is the experiences they develop either with the political system, or with their interpersonal environment. In the first case, younger respondents lack experience, while in the second case, all cohorts have some type of experiences that can help them shape their attitudes towards others.

3.3. Theme 3: Reciprocal (dis)trust

This theme pertains to trust as a reciprocal relationship in which people assume that those who are trusting must be trusted. However, the absence of this relationship is translated as distrust from both parties. Reciprocity, as an integral component of trust, is more common at the interpersonal level than the political. More specifically, reciprocal trust at the interpersonal level is something that can be observed across all age cohorts, despite the fact that different conditions seem to have influenced and/or formed their trust in a reciprocal way. Within this context, the relations among respondents are closer, and most of them can assess their relationships with friends and family in terms of reciprocity. Several younger interviewees stressed that they trust others - yet not strangers due to riskiness - when they are trusted. In light of this framework, a respondent (GR 11-12 A) mentioned that 'his friend trusts him and he trusts him, too', and similarly, according to another respondent (GR 11-12 A): 'If there is no reason not to trust him and he trusts you, then you should trust him'.

With regard to younger cohorts, we observe that the elaboration of reciprocity in trust within interpersonal relationships appears to be particularly intertwined with confidentiality. As one of the young respondents emphasised:

> *I trust this friend because I have known her for many years, and she has never done anything to betray me, she has not told any of my secrets, she has not reacted badly to whatever I have told her. I believe that there is mutual trust between us, because when we fight, we do not blame each other to a third party. Moreover, she has not betrayed any of my secrets, even during our fight. Therefore, I think she is a person to whom I can tell my problems and my concerns, even if we often fight, and even if we have different opinions on some issues* (GR 14-15 B).

As for older age groups, we discern that another aspect of reciprocity of trust is associated with the sharing of a common value system; in this respect, a respondent mentioned that 'everything starts from the fact that we share a common value system' (GR 30+ B).

Moreover, reciprocity could be considered as a benefit of interpersonal trust, contributing not only to the development of individuals, but also to the maintenance of social

order. In this regard, young respondents believe that 'it is useful to trust others because if you trust them, then they will trust you, too' (GR 11-12 A), while others mentioned that 'human civilisation has managed to survive and evolve because we practically trusted each other creating communities and later societies' (GR 18-19 B). Although some of the respondents rejected the idea of blind trust as harmful; nonetheless, they gave prominence to the importance of reciprocal trust in the interpersonal context. More specifically, they underlined that:

> *We should not trust blindly. On the contrary, we have to realise at some point how important trust is, and most importantly we should realise that there is no way to get anything if we do not take risks, trust and evolve. We will not be able to evolve if we do not trust because we evolve through friction with other people. Therefore, if we do not accept that we must take risks and trust, we will never evolve* (GR 18-19 B).

Au contraire, the condition of the pandemic seems to have played an integral role in the difficulty of developing reciprocal trust in the interpersonal context. Some of the respondents expressed their fear and/or stress when the others were not complying with the protective measures taken to tackle the transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic in an attempt to protect themselves, as well as the community in general. In other words, they stressed the absence of individual responsibility towards the handling of an emergency. For example, some indicated that:

> *It was very stressful because it was not just us who had to follow the measures, but at the same time we had to impose them on others, somehow. Therefore, this procedure was very stressful. At school, we saw not only students, but also teachers who did not adhere to the measures! In addition, as I was in the third year of high school, it was very stressful because we had all the stress and the fatigue from the quarantine coupled with the fear that someone who was not wearing a mask would infect us* (GR 18-19 B).

Even the little ones were claiming that "we will not get the virus". This was derived from the perception that "we will not get the virus and hence we do not care about the others". What bothers me the most is the opinion that "I am fine, and I do not care about others". In other words, I am more bothered about the way we, as parents, raise our children, than all the rest (GR 30+ A).

Regarding political trust, there is formality in this relationship, and people do not usually expect to be trusted in a reciprocal way by the political system. However, in Greece, during the pandemic, there was a thorough discussion about individual responsibility, and what citizens could do in order to protect not only themselves, but the others, as well. Some of the respondents believe that the political system did not trust citizens, a fact that resulted in the imposition of strict measures during the pandemic. Interestingly, according to our respondents:

> *The politicians have gained our trust. That is, the measures they were putting in place, "We Stay Home" and all that, it shows that the politicians did not trust us either, because they were basically locking us up to basically tell us "We do not trust you, because if we put some measures out, you would not comply with them". And it is a chain, so they do not trust us, so we do not trust them* (GR 18-19 B).

Therefore, there was reciprocity in distrust between the political system and citizens.

Age differences: We concluded that in this theme, there are no significant differences between respondents of different age groups. We noticed that reciprocity in (dis)trust is more common at the interpersonal rather than the political level, irrespective of the age criterion. However, we could not disregard the fact that for the older groups, reciprocity in dis(trust) could also be traced to the institutional context.

3.4. Theme 4: The effects of life experiences

In this theme, we analyse how specific life experiences affected trust or distrust on an interpersonal and **institutional** levels. Therefore, the effects of life experiences have a substantial effect on (dis)trust on **interpersonal** and **institutional** levels. The **interpersonal** experiences of interviewees led to (dis)trust, in the context of family or friend relationships. In the above context, positive or negative experiences of trust impact the overall experience of trust. Betrayals, disappointments or credibility in the family or friend context are generally parameters of (dis)trust.

On the other hand, the institutional experience **is linked mostly to (dis)trust**. Negative experiences, mainly with the government, such as the disorganisation, the dysfunctional public administration, doubts on governmental decisions and the implemented measures during the pandemic, were the reasons for distrust. Interviewees, mostly from older age groups, did not speak about positive experiences with the government, other institutions, or politicians. Positive institutional experiences are linked to the first period of the pandemic.

For many interviewees, the experience of others mattered, too, in the case of institutional experience. In the case of trust, some interviewees trusted experts who were able to coordinate the appropriate measures during the Covid pandemic.

Interpersonal experience is linked to **the experiences of others**. Most interviewees said that their trust is mediated by the personality of others: if the person is trustworthy, someone who keeps their secrets or someone who has not betrayed them, someone reliable, the interpersonal experience is then positive. Many times, interviewees mentioned that they had known a person for a long time (a member of the family for example, or a close friend), and their experience was mainly positive. The focus groups of 11-12, in particular, mentioned the parameter of the well-known other as a parameter of trust: 'You can't trust someone you don't know, no matter what he says' (GR 11-12 A).

In contrast, the interpersonal experience with someone who was not a good friend, or a reliable person, led to a negative interpersonal experience and to distrust. On the above framework, Kostas underlines: "I am thinking of someone; we used to hang out. He could betray some of our secrets in order to find some new friends. He has repeatedly lied to us about something. And that's why I don't trust him" (GR 14-15 B). Several older interviewees talked, throughout the focus groups, about reliability, toxic behaviour and dishonesty, and hurtful experiences. Several interviewees described how they distrusted someone after the person 'proved to be toxic' (GR 30+ B), 'spread gossip' about them and 'doesn't care about them' (GR 18-19 B), 'cannot put themselves in the

shoes of the other, and understand your story' (GR 18-19 A), or 'betrayed them' (GR 11-12 A).

What is interesting is how the interpersonal experience has been built during the Covid period. For those who had someone close to inform them of the measures, or for those who had friends or parents who were not anxious about Covid, they felt safer and more trusting during the pandemic:

> *My sister is a nurse, and my sister-in-law is a doctor, so we had very good information about what should and shouldn't be done, and what is likely, what is unlikely, what is too much* (GR 30+ B).

> *I liked the first quarantine; I liked the quarantine, in general. Because as another participant said, it's all about, let's say, how comfortable your parents are with it. My family didn't have a problem going out, so I went out almost every day with my friends and I had a great time during quarantine* (GR 14-15 B).

There were some positive institutional experiences especially during the first Covid period. As an interviewee admits:

> *At the beginning, the government was honest and sincere and I think that is very important. The one who has the power is the most responsible, when a relationship is dysfunctional, when we discuss the citizen-state relationship. I had trust in them not because they were trying to explain to us, but because they tried to show an honest and sincere face on an issue, in a situation which was particularly critical. I appreciated this situation very much because we have to be firm in a particularly turbulent situation* (GR 18-19 B).

> *The government came out with scientists who presented in a very documented way the facts, what the situations are, what's going on internationally. They were informing, they were answering questions, and they had opened a line of communication with citizens, thanks to a call centre* (GR 30+ B).

Positive institutional experiences passed through the specialists that came out during the first days to support the information process of the government. All ages have confirmed their trust in the specialists: 'I trusted them because they knew what we had to do' (GR 11-12 A), 'I do believe that we should always trust others, especially in issues that we don't know very well' (GR 13-15 A).

Therefore, **the experience of other countries with Covid** was influential for some interviewees, too. Our interviewees underlined that:

> *I think we did it to a certain extent better than other countries. I remember last year I had chosen to go to Poland for a three-month period, and at the last minute, the cases in Poland went from 5,000 a day, to 35,000 to 40,000 a day. This happened in three, four days, so I couldn't go. In the Greek case, we had stabilised the cases, and there was not this increase* (GR 18-19 A).

And as another interviewee said:

> *If we see what happened globally with governments, we will see: France, how the French reacted and the damage that was done there. If we take a look at London. If we see it globally with the irresponsibility that the Italian government*

showed in starting the whole situation, and the hundreds of victims. If we compare to Australia, and the way the crisis was handled there. If we look at it in relation to America. Greece, either by luck or I don't know, dealt better the Coronavirus, at least during the first phase (GR 30+ B).

In contrast, **the negative institutional experience** with the government caused interviewees' distrust. Changing and meaningless measures, broken promises, or bad decisions by politicians strongly affected distrust, especially during the Covid pandemic. The institutional experience is linked to negative experience of the implemented measures during the pandemic, especially the vaccination. Interviewees highlighted the role of the absurd measures taken by the government:

So, I don't think it was a serious attempt, there was nothing serious. I have friends who are nurses, I have a sister who is a nurse, I have seen smears being made in the health sector. That is, taking nurses from here and putting them there and christening a room a Covid Unit. So, I don't think anything specific was done in that direction, and everything else was up in the air. And just suppression and don't come out, and why you looked, and why you talked, and why you spat, and why you went to the pavilion (GR 30+ B).

As a younger interviewee said:

I can say in general terms that the measures didn't make sense. Some measures in the school should not have been taken. Let's say the measures, the self-tests and the distinction between vaccinated and unvaccinated, didn't make sense. If someone wanted to declare false information, they just went on the platform without any restrictions, declared the desired result and just went to school. On the other hand, the measures taken in the school, we had for example to open the windows. They opened the windows whenever the teachers remembered; there was overcrowding everywhere, there was antiseptic, hardly anyone used it, so the measures they took could be said to be of no use. Some were useful, some were not (GR 18-19 A).

Just as in the previous sections**, the experience of others had an impact on the interviewees**. As an interviewee explained:

Well, during the pandemic period, I will agree it was difficult. Many children were not following the measures, as well as teachers not wearing masks, or objecting to being vaccinated, doing the rapid test, and many children were saying that they had done the test when they hadn't. For me, that was a big mistake because it was basically putting our lives at risk (GR 18-19 A).

This negative experience of others contributed to distrust. One interviewee mentioned individual responsibility, a frame used by the Greek government: "Now the other thing that I think was mentioned before, with how much each of us did the tests, I think it's a question of social responsibility, first and foremost, which is raised by the individual. I have an individual responsibility that I have to take a test, for example, in order to find out for myself what state I am in' (GR 18-19 A) was a reason to distrust.

Age differences: For the older interviewees, trust seems to be a simple question of interpersonal experience. Trust is strictly connected to the family 'because they know what is best for you' (GR 11-12 A), or friendships tried and tested over time. As Alina

said: 'I trust this person because I have known her for many years, and she has never done anything to betray me, never told my secret, never reacted badly to anything I have told her' (GR 14-15 A). For older interviewees, the interpersonal experience is a more complicated process that does not end in trust necessarily. Interpersonal experience is linked to dishonesty, toxic behaviours, but also of danger of getting hurt. Institutional experience is intermediated, to all ages, by a critical point which is addressed to the government and the implementation of absurd or controversial measures during the Covid period.

3.5. Theme 5: Predictability as source of (dis)trust

The condition of the pandemic was unprecedented, and disrupted every known predictable framework. The emotion of fear of the unknown was very strong for most of the respondents, and the ambiguity of the measures followed caused insecurity and distrust. Predictability of arguments and behaviour means that people know what to expect from a particular person or organisation. When the condition of predictability is broken, then trust is transformed to distrust.

However, the relationship between predictability and trust was somehow paradoxical during the first period of the pandemic (March 2020-May 2020). Although the situation was unprecedented, and any notion of predictability was diminished, trust in the decision makers seemed necessary and realistic. The Greek government adopted a stricter approach regarding quarantine from the very beginning, and this was perceived as effective since the number of deaths by COVID-19 was extremely low in Greece. The good performance of the Greek state during the first months of the pandemic was also rewarded by public opinion, with levels of trust in government rising during that period (Dianeosis, 2020). For our respondents, too, trust in good intentions and knowledge of experts was given during this period. For some, it was based on the assessment of the situation, and for others, it was the lack of options:

> *I actually wanted to believe that everything was for our own good. That's why I was more positive in the beginning because I saw some signs that were quite positive, with the quarantine there was some precaution* (GR 18-19 B).

> *I trusted them because I had nothing better to do, there was nothing better to do. In situations like this, you do the least bad, what you think is the least bad* (GR 30+ B).

> *In my mind, as far as the Greek government in particular is concerned, I divide it into stages. The first stage, I had trust because I didn't know. I thought that what was happening was right, that is, in the news that we saw and the comparisons with other countries, and our infection rates were very low, so what was happening I thought was right, and I believe that, by Greek standards, it was indeed right in the first stage* (GR 18-19 A).

As the pandemic continued, and people started to doubt the effectiveness and the need of measures, trust in government waned. Most of the respondents discussed the ambiguity of the measures taken, and were puzzled by the government's motives behind this back and forth regarding the pandemic restrictions:

I think that initially they were trying to appeal to our emotions and scaremongering "We will get this, and we will die"; I would have preferred that they had appealed to my logic and told me some research findings, some evidence to see, so that I could be sure that what I am doing is the right thing (GR 30+ A).

The point was that there was no firm line, no firm policy and no firm positions and decisions. Now, were they also being misdirected? Were they following others? Were they being dictated to by vested interests? The virus cannot disappear in the summer when the tourists come, and come back in the winter. So, I think that somewhere in there, the citizens' trust in all this has been lost (GR 30+ A).

Predictability and/or stability is a very important element of interpersonal trust, as well. Respondents expect consistency in attitudes and behaviours of those in whom they trust: 'Generally I trust the one who shows consistency of words and deeds, that is, if someone tells me one thing and does another, then I think I lose my trust' (GR 30+ A). It is also interesting that some respondents of older age groups (30+) consider extreme and exorbitant views as a sign of unpredictability that leads to distrust. Unexpected and fringe attitudes make them feel insecure and distrustful towards people they associate with, and they try to distance themselves:

When someone expresses something in an exaggerated way, it also makes me lose trust. It generally makes me feel more trusting of a person who can be a little more balanced, according to my own criteria (GR 30+ B).

Another factor that is associated with predictability and trust is how well they know people they associate with. For most of the respondents, family members are mostly predictable and have their trust. So, this emotional bond that is developed between children and parents, and in general between family members, appears as a reference point in our respondents, especially in the younger ones: 'I only trust my family and friends that I have known for a long time and I know they don't tell secrets' (GR 11-12 B).

Age differences: the most noticeable difference between age groups is the implicit reference of trust in family members and how stable and predictable they consider it. However, in Greek society, family is considered a very important institution that has replaced the weak welfare state, so for most of Greeks, family offers a predictable framework, and is a source of trust (Georgakakou, 2013).

3.6. Theme 6: Development of (dis)trust through time

Development of (dis)trust through time refers to the basic element of trust, thus, the time needed to develop trust. We discern between different segments of distrust through time. Our focus will be on how (dis)trust builds over time with: personality traits, political decisions and implemented measures, and experiences.

From the perspective of our interviewees, let us begin from what seems to be the first thing that is built over time: trust in others. As our interviewees discuss, the time factor plays a very important role: 'A person gains my trust over time. I have to learn from our interactions over time. There are many elements to think about when building a sentiment of security, which means I can trust this person and continue to trust

them' (GR 30+ B). Younger people seem to be suspicious of those who do not know them well, and underline that 'there are a lot of people who I considered as friends at the beginning, or who I trusted a lot and it turned out not to be true. Because, as I said before, I think you have to know the other person before you trust them, so....' (GR 14-15 A). Along the same line of argument, time seems to be a self-evident fact. Our interviewees have discussed how the time factor impacted their trust sentiment: 'I trust a friend of mine I've known for a long time, and I trust him because I've known him for so long' (GR 11-12 A), or: 'We've been friends for many years, so I trust him' (11-12A), or: 'I trust my friends that I have known for a long time, and I have been with them for a long time' (GR 11-12 B), or 'I only trust my relatives and friends that I have known for a long time' (GR 11-12 B).

Time is a parameter to check the results of a policy choice. For many people who were suspicious over political decisions during the pandemic, time was a key factor to estimate policy choices. Interviewees have raised their feelings of distrust about the vaccines:

> *Time will tell, if the vaccine is okay. I mean, I think time will tell, if it will affect us positively, negatively, whatever... If I become a spider-man, or if I die that is, you know, I make it a little bit more like that, right? I mean from the moment we made a decision about whether or not we want to get the vaccine, or whatever* (GR 30+ A).

Time is also a factor that impacted trust during the pandemic. The three periods of the pandemic changed perceptions of trust. During the pandemic, political choices made during the first period changed during the second and the third periods. Policy choices have changed over time. Our interviewer said:

> *When you see that things are not turning out as they initially appeared. That's what happened during the pandemic. If the first period worked well, then there was confusion about the measures, the choices that were made during the next periods. And then, as time went on and things became more and more...* (GR 18-19 B).

Our interviewees underlined **the experience as a factor for trust**. It is considered that an old man has accumulated experience, has knowledge and experience which inspires trust. As our interviewee discusses:

> *I will simply add that I also look at the age factor, because for better or worse age brings experience. I want to know that the person I trust has knowledge, not necessarily the basic education, but knowledge in terms of cultivating his spirit. I prefer to know that the person I trust has some basic knowledge so that he can judge in a better way* (GR 18-19A).

Age differences: Trust over time becomes a key factor for younger ages. The focus of 11-12 and 14-15 age groups understand time as a factor that builds their feelings of trust. The younger people feel that a relationship tested over time is a valuable experience for the building of trust. Therefore, for the focus groups of older people, time is a key factor for the estimation of the governmental policies, especially under the experience of the pandemic.

3. Discussion and conclusions

From the analysis of focus group data with different age groups ranging from 11 to 30+ years old, we constructed six themes to conceptualise (dis)trust and its sources. The themes, (Dis)trust developed by circumstances and context and (Dis)trust as a general stance and attitude in the first place, design different forms and structures of citizens' trust or distrust in different contexts and conjunctures. The remaining themes, The effects of life experiences, Reciprocal (dis)trust, Predictability as source of (dis)trust and Development of (dis)trust through time, refer to the processes through which trust and distrust develop.

Our results show that during risk situations like the global pandemic, trust can be considerably different during the evolution of the phenomenon. What seems to differentiate parameters are the specific conditions experienced in each country during the subsequent phases of the pandemic, differentiating the first months from the later period. Moreover, elements of trust, like sincerity, honesty, knowledge, etc., were considered significant by our respondents. The first condition regarding (dis)trust, during the first months of the pandemic, is the one of necessity. Most of the respondents felt exposed to the unknown caused by the global pandemic, and their instant reaction to that was trust to those in charge because 'they know better'. Interestingly enough, we observed a close connection between trust as a necessity, and the belief that the measures were taken by a combination of actors, that is to say, the Greek government, the advisory committee of experts, the European Union and, in some cases, with guidelines from the World Health Organisation. Moreover, there were elements of trust that concerned the characteristics the respondents attributed to those in charge, like expertise in the matter, and knowledge regarding the medical components of COVID-19.

On the other hand, distrust was also apparent and very strong, especially for the older cohorts when they were assessing the government. In this case, once again the condition of the pandemic was unique, but it was dealt with as another crisis that the state mechanism should control, and so criticism was unavoidable. The main element of distrust in this case was the ambivalence of the measures taken for the control of the pandemic. Among the general criticism regarding the ambivalence of measures, some of the respondents attributed blame to those in power because of what they perceived as insincerity, dishonesty and suspicion of corruption. They felt that people were not informed properly about the reasoning of the measures, or the decisions to revoke them.

We can say that definitions of trust and distrust towards actors and institutions regarding the Covid measures is a two-pronged phenomenon that is developed not only by the assessment of recent political events but also from long-standing and rooted attitudes regarding the political system in general. First, the condition of the pandemic and the strict measures taken by the government which led to contesting attitudes about the restrictions and the effectiveness of the measures taken. Second, for some, distrust was already intense and has pre-existed as a general stance towards the political system over the past years. Many people reacted to the quarantine measures, and others had serious doubts about the vaccines and the existence of the pandemic.

Our interviewees put a considerable emphasis on the rational nature of their (dis)trusting attitudes compared to the intuitive or affective sides. In the same manner, interviewees often criticised extremely strong forms of trust, or distrust as "blind", referring to their presumed irrationality, inaccuracy, and vulnerability to bias.

Those who believe in critical trust acknowledge as key characteristics of a person knowledge and information; the goal must always be the search for different views on a subject, and the ability to assess them. The argument behind critical trust as a personality trait is not suspicion, but a more rational view of adequately informed citizens.

Moreover, trust and distrust can be seen as the different outcomes of citizens' assessment. Criticism and appraisal were present, but in the context of insecurity and the unknown, for some of the respondents, trust was the only alternative. They trusted the experience and knowledge of the experts, and the will for the general good by the political system.

In the context of interpersonal relationships, trust as a reciprocal relationship assumes that those who are trusting must be trusted. Reciprocity as an integral component of trust is more common at the interpersonal level than the political. More specifically, reciprocal trust at the interpersonal level is something that can be observed across all age cohorts, despite the fact that different conditions seem to have influenced and/or formed their trust in a reciprocal way. Within this context, the relations among respondents are closer, and most of them can assess their relationship with friends and family in terms of reciprocity. Moreover, reciprocity could be considered as a benefit of interpersonal trust contributing not only to the development of individuals, but also to the maintenance of social order. The condition of the pandemic seems to have played an integral role in the difficulty of developing reciprocal trust in the interpersonal context. Some of the respondents expressed their fear and/or stress when the others were not complying with the protective measures taken to tackle the transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic in an attempt to protect themselves, as well as the community in general.

The effects of life experiences have a substantial effect on (dis)trust on interpersonal and institutional level. The interpersonal experiences of interviewees led to (dis)trust in the context of family or friends' relationships. In the above context, positive or negative experiences of trust impact the overall experience of trust. Betrayals, disappointments or credibility in the family or friends' contexts are generally parameters of (dis)trust. On the other hand, the institutional experience is linked mostly to (dis)trust. Negative experiences, mainly, with the government, such as disorganisation, the dysfunctional public administration, doubts on governmental decisions, and the implemented measures during the pandemic, were the reasons for distrust. Interviewees generally did not speak about positive experiences with the government, other institutions, or politicians. Positive institutional experiences are linked mainly to the first period of the pandemic.

Interpersonal experience is linked to the experiences and time spent with others. Trust is something that can be built over time and while a relationship with other people is growing and becoming closer. As our interviewees discussed, the time factor plays a very important role, and their long-term interaction with others is the key component or the basis of trust. Most interviewees said that their trust is mediated by the personality of others: if the person is a trustworthy, someone who keeps their secrets or

someone who has not betrayed them, someone reliable, the interpersonal experience is then positive. In contrast, the interpersonal experience with someone who was not a good friend or a reliable person led to a negative interpersonal experience and, in turn, to distrust.

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7. The Covid Pandemic and Trust in Italy

Enrico Padoan and Francesco Marangoni

1. The Covid Pandemic in Italy

Italy was "the first country (after China) and the first democracy, to be hit, when very little was known about the virus" (Bull, 2021: 155). The country, still in 2023, ranks among the 'top 10' countries in the world according to several Covid-related statistics – number of Covid cases, number of deaths (more than 180,000 in March, 2023) and number of swabs. In Italy, the very first decision of locking an entire democratic country down (11 March 2020) was taken, "a genuine leap into the unknown" (Bull, 2021: 156) for its social and economic consequences, which had been severe indeed, since the GDP fell by more than 10 percentage points in 2020 (and has not fully recovered to 2019 levels yet). It is thus safe to argue that, at least in its very first phases, Italians dealt with the Covid threat in a context that was particularly marked by uncertainty.

This may contribute to understanding how the 'rally around the flag' effect was particularly effective in Italy (Schraff, 2021). The so-called "Conte II government" – the second government led by the prominent figure, Giuseppe Conte, of the populist-leftist party, the Five Star Movement (M5S), and formed by the M5S, the centre-left Democratic Party and the tiny centrist party Italia Viva – had been in charge since September 2019 and was not enjoying high approval ratings when the pandemic emergency hit. Instead, governmental approval ratings (up to 70 percent) skyrocketed particularly in the so-called 'Phase 1' of the pandemic, which ended in June 2020, when the lockdown measures were gradually revoked (Serani, 2021). Conte II government ensured some economic relief to firms and workers affected by the measures; Conte's constant communication – mostly via his own social media accounts, whose followers increased by nearly two million in a few months (Ceccobelli and Vaccari, 2021) – highlighted in strong emotional terms both the gravity of the situation, and the importance of 'staying safe', with emphasis on protection provided by the state (in terms of health assistance and economic relief: De Blasio and Selva, 2021) and on national unity ('If you love Italy, then keep your distance' was one of the slogans adopted by the PM in his speeches).

The following 'phases' of the pandemic evolution were less favourable to the Conte II government. After summer 2020, when – also as a consequence of the draconian measures taken in the spring – the cases were comparatively lower than the rest of Europe, and the measures were gradually relaxed, in autumn and winter 2020-2021 new waves severely affected Italy, and the government reacted by tightening the rules again (particularly during the Christmas' holidays), and by adopting a territorially-targeted approach (Bull, 2021). When the vaccination campaign was about to (with difficulty) begin, a cabinet crisis was provoked by the centrist party Italia Viva, particularly

critical of both the vaccination campaign and Conte's refusal to rely on the ESM (European Stability Mechanism) to invest in health structures. A new technocratic government relying on an oversized coalition (basically, all the parties in Parliament except the far-right Fratelli d'Italia – Brothers of Italy, FdI) and led by the former ECB Director, Mario Draghi, took office. Also because of such a vast coalition supporting his government, Draghi enjoyed high approval ratings (constantly between 60 and 70 percent), until his resignation following the withdrawal of support from centre-right, right-wing parties (as well as from the M5S) in June 2022. Early elections in September 2022 led to the formation of the current right-wing government, led by the leader of FdI, Giorgia Meloni. It is important to highlight that the fieldwork for this research was conducted between July and October 2022, i.e., during the electoral campaign, and ended just after the general election.

Most of the Covid-related controversies during Draghi's government revolved around the vaccination campaign, which was relatively successful (over 46 million citizens in 2021 got at least one dose of the vaccine, 87 percent of populations older than 12: Tafuri et al. 2021) through a "compulsion and incentives" strategy (ibidem). The controversy over the adoption of the "Green Pass" and the "Super Green Pass" (i.e., the release of 'Green Pass' to enter public places, including workplaces, given only to the vaccinated or constantly swabbed) was dominant, including in the social media sphere, and clearly championed by the far-right opposition (Pilati & Miconi, 2022), although most Italians, according to the polls, were in favour of such measures, at least in 2021, when the vaccination campaign was at its peak (64% in favour vs. 26% against the 'Super Green Pass' in December 2021) – numbers were more balanced when compulsory vaccination of children was considered, though.[9]

2. Procedure and Participants

2.1 Procedure

This report presents the findings of a research task (Work Package 2) The very first step of our research consisted of obtaining the approval from the Ethical Committee of the University of Siena for what concerned both the research design and the modules of informed consent, which had to be targeted for different participants (adults and minors, respectively) and were drafted by their own Ethical Committee. We digitally archived all the informed consents signed by each of our 32 participants to the focus groups (and by both parents of the 24 minors involved).

Once both approvals from the Ethical Committee had been obtained, we proceeded to independently translate the focus groups' guidelines and questionnaire, and to organise a pre-test focus group session, in which three 11-12-year-old children participated,

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[9] https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/covid-oggi-sondaggi-opinioni-super-green-pass-obbligo-vaccinale-vaccino-bambini

selected from our three researchers' families. We paid most attention to the intelligibility of the questionnaires, particularly among younger participants – this was the reason behind the selection of the youngest age cohort for the pre-test session – and into the concrete management of the session, in order to understand how to keep it within reasonable time limits, and how to interact optimally with participants (e.g. setting a serene and encouraging environment, maintaining a proactive – yet unintrusive – stance towards participants, dealing with different individual predispositions – vivacity, shyness - for such activities).

In terms of recruitment, we followed a snowball sampling strategy. Snowball sampling is useful because it concretely facilitates the task, but it is also likely to bias the process of data collection, as the researcher runs the risk of being trapped in a network of actors sharing the same positions about a particular topic (Bleich and Pekkanen, 2013). We adopted a strategy aimed at minimising this risk by relying on different chains of respondents from the outset. We strictly and successfully complied with the assigned stratification. Each of our eight focus groups were composed of four participants, two per gender and, as for both focus groups with participants between 30 and 50 years old, we had two participants with university degrees (one per gender), and two participants with high school degrees (one per gender). All the participants have been anonymised and listed in the table in section 2.2.

Focus groups were conducted between July and October 2022, by alternatively using (according to the preferences of participants) either Zoom or Google Meet. All the focus groups were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The focus groups lasted, on average, 83 minutes – with a minimum of 60 minutes and a maximum of 135 minutes. In all focus groups, two researchers attended – one as moderator and the other as observer and technical assistant. All the focus groups proceeded smoothly with no major issues, apart from some temporary and quickly resolved connection problems.

2.2 Participants

Table 1. List of participants to the focus groups.

	Age	Gender	School track / highest education	Education mother	Education father	Place of living
Focus group 11-12 A (n = 4)						
1	12	Male	Elementary	University or college	High school	Small town
2	12	Female	Elementary	University or college	University or college	Small town
3	11	Female	Elementary	High school	University or college	Small town
4	11	Male	Elementary	High school	University or college	Small town

Focus group 11-12 B (n = 4)						
1	12	Female	Elementary	University or college	High school	Medium / big city
2	12	Male	Elementary	University or college	University or college	Medium / big city
3	11	Male	Elementary	High school	University or college	Medium / big city
4	12	Female	Elementary	University or college	University or college	Small town
Focus group 14-15 A (n = 4)						
1	14	Male	Elementary	High School	High School	Small town
2	15	Female	Grammar High School	University or college	University or college	Small town
3	14	Male	Elementary	High School	High School	Small town
4	14	Female	Elementary	Elementary	Elementary	Small town
Focus group 14-15 B (n = 4)						
1	15	Male	Grammar High School	High School	High School	Small town
2	15	Male	Grammar High School	High School	High School	Small town
3	15	Female	Technical High School	High School	High School	Small town
4	15	Female	Grammar High School	University or college	University or college	Small town
Focus group 18-19 A (n = 4)						
1	18	Female	Grammar High School	University or college	University or college	Medium / big city
2	18	Male	Technical High School	High School	High School	Small town
3	18	Male	Technical High School	High School	High School	Small town
4	18	Female	Grammar High School	University or college	University or college	Medium / big city
Focus group 18-19 B (n = 4)						
1	18	Female	Grammar High School	University or college	University or college	Medium / big city
2	18	Male	Technical High School	High School	High School	Small town
3	18	Male	Technical High School	High School	High School	Small town
4	18	Female	Grammar High School	University or college	High School	Medium / big city
Focus group 30+ A (n = 4)						
1	31	Male	University or college			Small town
2	33	Female	University or college			Big city

3	32	Female	University or college			Big city
4	40	Male	University or college			Small town
Focus group 30+ B (n = 4)						
1	34	Male	High School			Small town
2	32	Female	University or college			Big city
3	37	Male	University or college			Small town
4	36	Female	University or college			Small town

2.3 Data Analysis

Following thematic analysis (see below), all the meaning units (MU) which were relevant for the research questions formed our dataset and were thus coded.[10] The research questions are the following:

- What are the meanings of trust and distrust to actors and institutions who issued measures to control Covid-19 in different age groups?
- How are sources of trust and distrust constructed in this context in different age groups?
- What are the meanings of trust and distrust within the domain of interpersonal relationships in different age groups?
- How are sources of trust and distrust constructed within the domain of interpersonal relationships in different age groups?

Coding procedure was done according to the tenets of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019; 2020), a data-driven and thus inductive approach (at least in the variant we adopted: i.e., inductive and semantic and mostly based on essentialist epistemology: see Braun and Clarke 2006) consisting of three phases, plus the concluding one – namely, the discussion. First, the identification of MUs, i.e., a portion of the text that is relevant regarding the research questions, carrying meaning that can be coded. Second, the coding of each MU, each code being a 'label', a sentence attached to the MU aimed at condensing its meaning. Third, the creation of 'themes', each theme capturing "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 82).

In our research, we ended up identifying 5 themes (see Section 3) from 205 codes, which come from 307 MUs distributed in our eight focus groups. The number of codes

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[10] All the introductory questions in our questionnaire, addressing how participants react to the early phase of the pandemic, served the purpose of setting a comfortable environment for discussion – however, the answers did not, for the most part, concern our research questions, and have not been coded as a result.

is not evenly distributed throughout our age groups, and there is a direct relationship between the number of codes and age groups (65 codes identified in the 11-12 age group; 71 in the 14-15 age group; 80 in the 18-19 age group; 91 in the 30-50 age group). The coding team was composed of two coders: the first one ('principal coder') proceeded to a first-round coding in both phases (i.e., assigning 'codes' and then 'themes'); the second coder ('check coder') critically discussed both rounds, and offered feedback with a view to the final coding outcome.

3. Results from the thematic analysis

We identified five themes, although the fifth one groups a smaller number of codes (N=12). Each identified code has been grouped exclusively into one theme. Seven codes out of 307 have not been grouped into other themes, and have been considered as 'residuals' ('miscellaneous' category). The themes we identified, and briefly described, are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes, Description and Number of Codes per Theme.

Theme	Concepts	Description	N codes
RESPONSI-BILITY AND TRUST	Responsibility / Transparency (lack of) - also through example	(Dis)trust is seen as connected to responsibility (lack of), in the sense that people/institutions assuming the consequences of their actions or judgements deserve to be trusted. In this sense, also transparency and sincerity, as a form of accountability, are valued as a source of trust. Also, arguments quoting the importance of positive and concrete examples of proper/right behaviour to generate trust have been included in this theme.	37
RECIPROCAL KNOWLEDGE / CLOSENESS AND TRUST	Closeness / Homogeneity	Trust is seen as generated by close, intimate forms of relationship, making people or institutions 'familiar' and consequently deserving of trust. This theme also includes statements pointing at the necessity of sharing values, ideologies and ways of thinking to be fully trusted.	51
RATIONAL-ITY AND TRUST	Rationality / Competence	Trust (distrust) is inspired by the competence (lack of) of people/institutions. Rational, grounded or scientific-sounding arguments inspire trust.	48
TRUST CONDITIONED TO OUTCOMES (INSTRU-MENTALITY)	Instrumental / Strategic / Cause and Effects	Trust and distrust, instead of being a predisposition or motivated by the credibility of the people/institutions, are conceded as far as these people/institutions bring some concrete results and thus can be considered trustworthy. Trust and distrust are also considered in their instrumental function, in the sense that both attitudes can be purposely adopted for different, individual or collective goals.	50

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (OR LACK OF IT)	Personal Experience / More emotional-impressionistic assessment	Trust/distrust generated by personal positive/negative experiences with specific people/institutions or motivated by 'vox populi' arguments. This is different from "concrete examples of proper/right behaviour" included in the "Responsibility and Trust" theme because in this latter sense, examples, instead of experiences, have been cited.	12
MISCELLA-NEOUS	(Referring to very specific arguments brought to the fore)	DISTRUST - FOLLOW THE MONEY; TRUST DESPITE TOO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES; DISTRUST LEADS TO DISTANCE FROM POLITICS; DISTRUST BECAUSE ECONOMY VS HEALTH DICOTOMY; DISTRUST AGAINST EXPERTS - TIREDNESS; DISTRUST BECAUSE NORMALISATION OF AUTHORITARIAN MEASURES; INEFFECTIVE INFLUENCE BY TEACHERS	7

In Sections 3.1-3.6 of this report, we will scrutinise each of these themes separately, by emphasising variation across age groups.

A preliminary approximation of the different thematisation of governmental and interpersonal trust can already be found in the ways the themes' frequency is distributed throughout age groups (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Frequencies of meaning units per themes per age group.

	N				
Theme	11-12	14-15	18-19	30-50	Tot
RESPONSIBILITY AND TRUST	20	12	11	19	62
RECIPROCAL KNOWLEDGE / CLOSENESS AND TRUST	20	19	21	17	77
RATIONALITY AND TRUST	12	17	11	30	70
TRUST CONDITIONED TO OUTCOMES (INSTRUMENTALITY)	10	21	30	17	78
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (OR LACK OF IT)	1	1	7	4	13
MISCELLANEOUS	2	1	0	4	7
Total	65	71	80	91	307

Table 4. Percentage of meaning units per themes of the total, per age group.

Theme	%	Percentage				
		11-12	14-15	18-19	30-50	Total
RESPONSIBILITY AND TRUST	20	32	19	18	31	100
RECIPROCAL KNOWLEDGE / CLOSENESS AND TRUST	25	26	25	27	22	100
RATIONALITY AND TRUST	23	17	24	16	43	100
TRUST CONDITIONED TO OUT-COMES (INSTRUMENTALITY)	25	13	27	38	22	100
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (OR LACK OF IT)	4	8	8	54	31	100
MISCELLANEOUS	2	29	14	0	57	100
Total	100	21	23	26	30	100

In the following sub-sections, we will more closely scrutinise each theme and their different nuances, as well as explore age group variations in more detail.

3.1 Theme #1: "Responsibility and Trust"

This theme refers to meaning units in which trust (or distrust) is seen as connected to responsibility (or lack of it), in the sense that people/institutions assuming the consequences of their actions or judgements deserve to be trusted. In this sense, also transparency and sincerity, as a form of accountability, are valued as a source of trust.

In a more indirect way, also arguments quoting the importance of positive and concrete examples of proper/right behaviour to generate trust have been included in this theme. This analytic decision has been done because a positive, so to speak, record of trustworthiness can resemble the positive function assigned to sincerity (which, in a similar way, can also be assessed in a later moment) in order to generate trust.

As aforementioned, this theme is particularly present among the youngest participants in our focus groups. By far, the key word is 'betrayal', and the expression "to betray someone's [my] trust" (tradire la fiducia: e.g., IT 11-12 A and B), usually with references to "secrets" that have been revealed (and then disclosed). Out of 20 codes identified in the 11-12 focus groups and associated to this theme, 4 codes refer to "betrayal" as a cause of distrust, and the other four as a possible negative consequence of trusting. In addition, "people talking too much" has been, in a more general way, quoted once

as a source of distrust. Almost always, 'betrayal' is quoted, among younger participants, when discussing interpersonal trust, which is also affected by irresponsible behaviours, such as "breaking borrowed stuff" (IT 11-12 A). When instead of focusing on trust in the government in the Covid-19 context, the youngest participants often tend to emphasise the importance of assuming the consequences of their actions in order to be trusted. The Covid situation, in particular, is an example of an "emergency situation", showing which figures deserved to be trustworthy (with implicit mention of the then PM, Giuseppe Conte: IT 11-12 B). The Ukrainian PM Zelensky has been associated with this behaviour because "he stayed there in Kiev, instead of running away as other people would have done. In this specific situation [war], he showed himself to be a good person" (IT 11-12 B). With specific reference to the measures taken to slow the spread of the pandemic, a participant underscored the imposition of excessively strict measures, which were at the same time impossible to comply with (such as keeping "two-metre distances when chatting"), inspired distrust because it was seen as a form of 'responsibility-shifting' (from the government to citizens: IT 11-12 B). Refusing to accept responsibility for mistakes and thus "arrogantly insisting in defending past choices", despite evidence, has also been considered as leading to distrust, while, in contrast, "transparency" has been lauded (IT 11-12 A and B respectively).

Distrust mounting from 'betrayals' (typically, linked to "revealing secrets") is recalled five times out of the 12 meaning units included in the Responsibility theme from focus groups with 14- and 15-year-olds. Overall, this theme is not central for this cohort. Frankness and altruistic behaviour inspire interpersonal trust (IT 14-15 A and B). As for trust in government, "lack of enforcement" of restrictive measures has been told to increase distrust (as a sign of lack of political willingness: IT 14-15 B), while an example of irresponsible communication has been identified in a school teacher, who advanced critical positions towards governmental measures, and was accused by a participant of disrespecting institutions (because she was abusing her role) and of delivering "propaganda-like speeches" that were dubbed as "annoying":

> *Especially one of my teachers who spoke negatively about the government, she wanted us to put our masks down, stay closer, she was a bit against it, she had her own ideas but communicated them in the wrong way. She was saying things she couldn't say. I listened to her, I thought she was neither right nor wrong, I was trying to understand. She had different ideas, so it was interesting. But she talked badly about everything, about the government, she was a bit of a denier, I listened to her at the beginning, but then it made me nervous to listen to her because I feel informed enough but I couldn't process all the things she was saying. While other comrades unable to elaborate their own ideas could be influenced. She was really against Italian medicine, this bothered me. The way she spoke annoyed me. She spoke ill of everyone* (IT 14-15 A).

Among 18- and 19-year-olds, the recurrent nature of the Responsibility theme was comparatively lower than among 14- and 15-year-olds. However, in this age group, in

comparison to the younger ones, the elaboration on governmental trust – instead of interpersonal trust – was higher. Arguments touching both the governmental and interpersonal dimensions refer to "lack of coherence" and "excessive promises" as major drivers of distrust. For instance, a participant focuses on how experts had assured that "everything would be OK" in the near future, without having any certainty about this, and without having any political responsibility on the topic (IT 18-19 B). A strong argument against the governmental policy on vaccination was made by precisely pointing out the refusal by the state to impose compulsory vaccinations, while forcing citizens to vaccinate – under their own responsibility – through strong limitations on their movements if unvaccinated:

> *Well, it seemed to me that there was no obligation to vaccinate, but an obligation to the Covid Certificate. This made me a bit angry. To make it compulsory by other means… I find it shady, that is. Had there been an obligation to vaccinate, OK, no problem, the state takes responsibility for accidents. But here they make you sign a form saying if something happens, it's your own decision. There it made me lose confidence. If it had been done differently, there would have been less opposition* (IT 18-19 A).

Some participants indicated, as key drivers for increasing trust in governmental measures, and vaccination in particular, the concrete examples brought by relatives and close people who decided to vaccinate despite their fragile health condition (IT 18-19 A). In all three cases, taking a decision with potential negative consequences has been praised. In between political and interpersonal trust, a participant argued: "Do not trust politicians and, more generally, people adapting their opinions to specific interlocutors in order to please them". An interesting argument (also brought to the fore by older participants) causally linked political and interpersonal trust, by noticing how "trust in government increased, and at the same time trust in other people decreased because their irresponsible behaviour made governmental measures less effective" (IT 18-19 B).

Among participants from 30 to 50 years old, most of the discussion was centred on trust to Covid-related measures. Several participants, in both focus groups, pointed to the lack of effective enforcement and compliance as major drivers of political and interpersonal trust, respectively – although one participant, who was highly critical of restrictive measures and vaccines, was made more acutely distrustful by the quasi-compulsory vaccination programme (IT 30-50 A). Political trust was particularly affected, similar to what emerged from late teenagers' focus groups, by the perceived tendency to merely look for support by appealing to certain sectors, in a non-rational way, instead of responsibly dealing with the crisis. One of the motivations for the rise of distrust was thus the perception of politics as a purely responsive and non-responsible realm; this is reminiscent of Peter Mair's distinction (2014) between 'responsibility' and 'responsiveness'. Furthermore, instead of tackling serious issues, such as education, the debate has been perceived as being focused on sports, on reactivating the football league, and this created huge distrust (IT 30-50 A). However, experts have been accused of having been, in contrast, excessively non-responsive, i.e., to have

failed to consider social and political variables when arguing for restrictive measures, and to have acted in an "authoritarian" way, and often without guaranteeing the necessary transparent access to data (IT 30-50 B).

3.2 Theme #2: "Reciprocal Closeness/Knowledge and Trust"

This theme refers to meaning units in which trust (or distrust) is seen as generated by close, intimate forms of relationship, making people or institutions 'familiar' and consequently deserving of trust. This theme also includes statements pointing at the necessity of sharing values, ideologies and ways of thinking to be fully trusted. Homogeneity, in this sense, is considered as a precondition to generate trust.

This theme is, by far, the most evenly distributed throughout our four different age groups. Again, among our youngest participants (11- and 12-years old), it was mostly the meaning units referring to interpersonal trust where the discussion lasted longer. People close to our participants were also key mediators in order to inspire trust in governmental measures. Difficult times increased the role of reassuring figures, and parents in particular; in turn, a couple of times friends and classmates have been reported to put some doubts – through their behaviour or their opinions – in the management of Covid emergency, while, at the same time, moments shared – even if via web platforms – with them during the lockdowns served to generate trust in the future. More generally, while people giving opinions, support and even acting as a "leader" (IT 11-12 A) inspires trust, on a couple of occasions "people having too much power" have been interestingly identified as inherently suspicious because "having power changes you and can make you unstable" (IT 11-12 B). As for interpersonal trust, apart from underlining that a trust relationship is a time-consuming process, the youngest participants highlighted how trust stems from the situation of sharing: sharing experiences; sharing characters and attitudes; sharing secrets and weaknesses. Indeed, trust "stems from mutual help" and is "non-existent if it's not reciprocal" (IT 11-12 B), while "people who do not like you" should not be trusted because they have "no interest in improving your situation" (IT 11-12 B). In terms of negative consequences of distrust, in both focus groups, it emerged how a distrusting attitude prevents you from expanding horizons and having enriching experiences; non-trusting people are dubbed as "unpleasant" (IT 11-12 B).

The patterns that have been identified in the 14- and 15-year-olds' focus groups are very similar to the patterns found among the youngest participants. The Closeness theme mostly refers to interpersonal trust, and only on a few occasions has been referred to as a source of political or institutional trust. Among the very few examples, teachers showing genuine "care" of students' health (more than mechanically forcing them to comply with the rules) have been mentioned (IT 14-15 B). Again, 'skeptical' classmates have been cited as sources of distrust (IT 14-15 B), as well as personal exposure to media, without the filter provided by parents (who, instead, played a positive role: IT 14-15 A), has been told to generate distrust – or pessimism about the situation

(IT 14-15 B). As for interpersonal trust, the most recurrent argument refers to the effects of negative experiences for developing a trusting attitude in the future (IT 14-15 A, B).

In 18- and 19-year-old focus groups, more political reasoning is traceable. The figure of the then PM Conte, who became famous for his dinnertime speeches delivered on TV and social media, was recalled, particularly in one of the focus groups, as a positive figure, who inspired trust for different reasons, though. A participant found in him "a bit of a representative of our country, a parental figure, something to be proud of, no?", merging 'rally-around-the-flag' effects with strong perception of familiarity (IT 18-19 A). Other participants confirmed: "I agree that Conte was a familiar figure, he seemed to speak to the family, to each one of us. Also, because I was desperate, huh...", and, somewhat emphasising a paternalistic (yet appreciated) communication:

> *I immediately felt confident. Having the evening appointment with him, a sort of routine... to chase away Covid. It gave confidence, stability, to have 9 p.m. on that channel Conte telling you that if you do certain things, everything will be OK. However, I have always taken little interest in politics, partly because of my age and partly for fear of being disappointed* (IT 18-19 A).

Quite originally, a participant also stressed how pop Internet culture built around the figure of Conte contributed to making him familiar, and thus reassuring:

> *When the decree came out, when Conte came out, partly because he was new [not so new!], he was appointed two years before as PM], partly because Conte's meme "everything will be fine, we'll be together" came out, let's say that the figure of Conte at that time... I was never interested in politics, and then I was at high school, I was thinking about other things, but Conte was a bit of a lifeline, I relied on him. Especially for the things that came out on the internet, the memes, the jokes, I identified myself in his figure* (IT 18-19 A).

Only one meaning unit (referring to the positive effect brought by having health workers in their own family) was categorised under the Closeness theme in this focus group. As for interpersonal trust, older teenagers do not express very different opinions from younger participants. More emphasis was put on "the capacity to forgive" (IT 18-19 B), on "sharing the same ideology and visions" (IT 18-19 B) and on "working on the same projects" (IT 18-19 B) as positive factors for trusting. As a consequence of trusting someone, the possibility of "behaving as you are" (i.e., being yourself, with fewer social filters) was also highlighted (IT 18-19 B). Generalised distrust and a more disenchanted vision was also detectable, jointly with – again – considerations emphasising the free expression of self-identity within a 'homogeneous', trustworthy environment as a plus generated by relationships based on trust:

> *If you look around, you realise that the people you really trust are very few. The people I can trust are a tenth of the people I know. But if you trust a few people, they are people who really give you a hand, and with them you can be yourself, and you have self-esteem and self-cognition that is admirable* (IT 18-19 B).

In the focus groups with 30-50-year-old participants, this theme was little mentioned. Closeness in terms of ideology or opinions has been mentioned. The latter one is particularly original because, as it was formulated, it mixes calls for 'rationality' to develop trust in experts, but also the necessity of looking for confirmation of previous opinions:

> *For example, take the following situation: you have to put yourself in the hands of a surgeon. I had thyroid cancer, I knew what the range of solutions was, I had to find someone who at that moment accommodated my concerns and gave me a solution that was compatible with my fears. I made a selection of that surgeon. I got multiple opinions. Since I have a somewhat scientific mind, I sought a rational opinion on what to do. That also corresponded somewhat with my own ideas on the issue* (IT 30-50 B).

In each of the focus groups with 30-50-year-old participants, there was a participant who proved to be highly critical of the Covid-related measures taken by the government. In both cases, interpersonal trust and distrust at the societal level were linked to the governmental decisions, in a way emphasising the breaking (or tying) of social bonds between people with divergent (or similar) opinions:

> *As always in history, there have always been sharp divisions. This was a time to create solidarity. A wasted opportunity for so many things. A heavy climate that we can all breathe, those who think one way and those who think another. On a positive level, groups were created by people feeling in tune, this created moments of sharing. There was a realisation that it is important to share* (IT 30-50 B); *I agree that the two sides really created splits even within the communities, the small communities, even in the workplace. We [in my workplace] tended to have a common thought, but these splits have created significant issues and clashes* (IT 30-50 B).

A participant, particularly sceptical of the Covid issue, emphasised kinship as a key source of trust ("Family ties are the strongest one, the only ones deserving trust"), as well as "first sensation, first impression, this is key", while also pointing out a negative consequence of trusting, because "this also implies dependency: you depend on that person when you trust her/him" (IT 30-50 A). Overall, all of these arguments together seem to point to how communitarian and libertarian visions may easily work together.

3.3 Theme #3: "Rationality and Trust"

This theme refers to meaning units in which trust (distrust) is inspired by the competence (lack of) of people/institutions. Rational, grounded or scientific-sounding arguments inspire trust. The distribution of the Rationality theme between age groups was highly varied: it was particularly skewed towards the older participants (the 30-50 age range accounted for more than 40 percent of the meaning units associated with this theme). This theme, unlike the previous two, mostly refers to Covid-related discussions.

The youngest participants argued, on four occasions, that an "excessive trust" – when 'excessive' means over concern about the Covid situation and the mechanical aspect of restrictions – leads to "fanatical" behaviours. These arguments – reported below – lie between the Rationality and the Instrumental/Strategic themes (see next section); we opted for including them in the Rationality theme because participants explicitly connect such an "excessive trust" with the loss of rationality.

> *P1: People who trust can become like my friend, a Covid fanatic, who cleans her bench multiple times, or tells others to put their mask on... and I trust her. There's one good thing about trusting: she's the only one who hasn't been sick in five years. So, you don't catch diseases. But I think it's a bit exaggerated, you go crazy in the end. P2: I agree. We're kids and we also have to live, if we're always checking, cleaning, being careful not to catch anything, it's a bit too risky like that. P3: I think so, too. Sometimes it is exaggerated. There are excessive formalities. Trusting too much makes the disease become a phobia. I realised that I feel almost naked if I go around without a mask. P4: It becomes like a law for you that you have to respect, after a while you go crazy. It becomes a fanatical thing* (IT 11-12 B).

Another participant emphasised how it was important to understand the rationale behind the measures, instead of just complying.

However, delivering "excessively scary messages" on the Covid situation, and adopting "fanatical" postures, according to a participant, can stimulate students to check if the data quoted by their teacher were reliable. In this specific case, the student autonomously verified that the data were "true" (IT 11-12 A). This can open important speculations on the (positive and negative) effects of such communication to young people, arguably still not fully able to undertake rigorous fact-checking activities.

Skeptical positions against Covid-related measures (including vaccines) were repeatedly criticised by relying on arguments referring to the concepts of 'rationality' and 'competence'. According to a participant, it was "nonsensical to follow the arguments of anti-vaccine demonstrators, because people with much more expertise had more credible suggestions and opinions" (IT 11-12 A). The recommendations by health workers – including general practitioners – were particularly effective (IT 11-12 A, B). Because of the tiredness generated by the long crisis, anti-vaccine opinions started generating even "discomfort": "Once you get a solution, it's silly to oppose it" (IT 11-12 B). In general, trusting people is also helpful because it leads to improving one's ability to reason, and to search for the best solution to a problem: "If you trust other people and their suggestions, you are less likely to make mistakes" (IT 11-12 B).

In the focus groups with 14- and 15-year-old participants, the Rationality theme was more central. Arguments appealing to rationality touched different Covid-related topics, and backed different positions. Overall, the role of experts in the Covid management was lauded. As a participant argued: "In my opinion, it is right to trust, to be cautious but to trust because the people who have decided on these restrictions are doing it for everyone, by relying on expert advice"; although, "by trusting too much,

you think that what the government says is right. And this may not always be true" (IT 14-15 A). Trust can thus lead to "manipulation" and to "diminished critical thinking" (IT 14-15 A). The importance of relying on informed opinions is also highlighted, and the official (governmental) sources were overall recognised as reliable:

> *I often trust the government; I almost always trust what the government says. But what other people say, or the professor I was talking about earlier, they must be taken with a pinch of salt; they can say something true, but also a lot of bullshit. What the government says, I trust it. I think they are quite informed. Of course, you have to create your own opinion and then listen to those who think like you, but also those who don't think like you* (IT 14-15 A).

And yet again, excessive 'fanatism' when spreading official information is considered as "counterproductive, because even I, a person who fully trusts official information, was bothered by somewhat fanatical endorsement and the spreading of official data" (IT 14-15 A).

Governmental distrust was also motivated by recurring arguments that can be included in this theme. This typically occurs when 'political' and 'scientific' decisions are set in opposition to each other. Scientifically unsound (or perceived as such) measures were highly criticised:

> *Initially, there was a lot of trust, then as time went by, trust waned, due to scientifically unsubstantiated measures, such as the curfew. Or like the mask yes at the bar, but only inside. I am not referring to a general figure. I saw the choice to impose new restrictions but without a strategy to return to normality (IT 14-15 B); I also agree. But I add that there are regulations even now that don't make sense, for example at school without any mask and on the bus, you need FFP2 mask* (IT 14-15 B).

A participant registered how there has been a diachronic change (for the worse):

> *Yes, at the time there was confidence, with the lockdown the numbers had dropped almost completely. And then, as the pandemic was a new thing, there was no other way of dealing with it. But then the numbers came back up; you could see that the scientific point of view was left aside, and between 2020 and 2021, confidence fell because nothing was done to address the problem* (IT 14-15 B).

It is important to highlight that, while arguments pointing to 'contradictions' in the measures implemented have been generally included in the Strategic/Instrumental theme (see Section 3.4), in all the aforementioned statements, the participants pointed to the lack of scientific rationale, which in turn provoked contradictory policies. Interestingly, rational arguments were also used to justify an agnostic attitude towards the Covid-related measures: "I was too young to disclaim; only later did I develop my own thinking on the issue. It's important to have informed opinions, not just opinions" (IT 14-15 A).

Among the 18-19-year-old participants, the Rationality theme was not central at all. Among the few mentions, some participants from both focus groups justify their trust in governmental measures because of the role played by experts in elaborating them (more generally, it has been argued that "we should all trust people with high educational levels more" (IT 18-19 A). A participant argued that "critical thinking is OK, but opposing scientific evidence… I mean, when you have scientific evidence, it's wrong to oppose it" (IT 18-19 B), although another participant argued: "Distrusting people was more relaxed, less scary and more objective than trusting people". Also, distrusting attitudes are thus praised for benefitting the overall attitude and mood in difficult situations. We also found, again, arguments putting in contrast political and scientific reasonings: "My trust in the Minister of Health Affairs at the beginning, when his decisions appeared to be more informed on scientific advisory, was high. Later, discretionary, and inconsistent measures increased distrust" (IT 18-19 A). The political sphere was also accused of investing in mediatic, 'flagship' measures that were far from representing a concrete response to the emergency (the explicit reference, here, was the Minister of Education, Azzolina (IT 18-19 A).

As said, meaning units referring to the importance of rational arguments to justify and inspire trust, and particularly trust in Covid-related measures and, overall, governmental management of the pandemic, were particularly central for the oldest cohorts in our research. One of the specificities of the debates within these focus groups, in comparison with focus groups with younger participants, is the contrast not only between 'politics' and 'science', but also between 'science' and scientists who are often negatively appraised.

The contrast between politics and science still remains, but the latter is qualified, by preferring to talk about "scientific method": "I trusted science, more specifically the scientific method. I was not very confident in political institutions, and in the fact that institutions could dialogue with the scientific community" (IT 30-50 A); "Politics just look for popular support, even to the detriment of the public good [in contrast to science]". However, scientists are also overtly targeted. A participant argued that "the pandemic was a big, missed, opportunity: the opportunity of explaining to the people what science is about. The scientific method has been betrayed by scientists looking for visibility and money, and in fact betraying the scientific mission and approach" (IT 30-50 B). Experts appearing on TV shows were particularly accused of "poor communication" and arrogance: "Institutions and academic advisory committees did not necessarily act poorly. The real problem was the TV experts who contributed to the spread of unverified or excessively assertive information" (IT 30-50 B). Sometimes, scientists were accused of acting 'like politicians', or of following political logics:

> *Experts spoke like they were sure about what they were talking about, and when some previous strategies were changed, this affected the credibility of the entire crisis management system […] they gave answers they didn't have in order to appease politics* (IT 30-50 B).

The same accusation of "arrogance" and "overconfidence" was directed at both scientists, who indeed acted in "anti-scientific way", because science "is about doubts, not certainties": IT 30-50 A), and politicians:

> *The real problem of the pandemic management was not the mistakes that were made. It was the fact that the government flaunted confidence when data did not justify such overconfident attitudes* (IT 30-50 B).

In general, the pattern we noticed was the following: a 'critical support' towards the governmental measures and quite strong critiques towards the mediatisation of science by participants with higher educational levels; either very strong support or strongly negative assessments of the governmental management (and the very existence of a 'pandemic emergency') from participants with a more static vision of science – fully confirming the findings by Post et al. (2022): "People with a need for definite information and a view of scientific knowledge as static wanted scientists to dominate policymaking and journalists to deliver definite information about the coronavirus. People with an informational need to construct their own opinions wanted journalists to question policy and scientific advice". While most of the participants pointed out the multiple contradictions in the governmental strategies, a couple of statements aimed at 'excusing' the government for its mistakes because "such contradictions were due to the lack of data: when new data were available, the strategies changed accordingly" (IT 30-50 B) – these arguments were often accompanied by considerations on the lack of compliance by citizens, who were the real culprits of the negative situation.

Lack of data transparency and of rational explanations to justify the rationale of the measures were repeatedly brought to the fore to motivate critiques (IT 30-50 A and B). In terms of consequences, several participants agreed with the fact that trust can affect critical thinking (IT 30-50 A and B), and that distrust can stimulate it, by pushing people to better inform themselves (IT 30-50 A). At the same time, a participant argued that "poor communication of the scientific process justifies the lack of trust among the people [however] distrust led to some excesses in the other sense, such as the spread of fake news on the vaccines" (IT 30-50 B). A couple of participants, from different focus groups, also wanted to qualify what 'trust' really meant in the context of the pandemic: for instance: "I would say that, at the very beginning, I did not really 'trust'… I 'believed'. In the sense that I had no idea about what we were facing, and I just estimated that the most rational way to behave was to follow what the government said" (IT 30-50 A). Indeed, "trusting someone who is trustworthy is easy. Trusting someone who does not inspire trust is a more difficult, but also a more conscious - more rational perhaps – act" (IT 30-50 B). Trust was also problematised in terms of power relationships; a collective discussion at the end of a focus group pointed to the existence of:

> *…two different trusts: trust in someone close to me, which implies an egalitarian relationship, and trust in someone who owns some expertise, such as a doctor. These different forms of trust imply different consequences, the latter potentially affecting me very much and without the possibility of exerting any control on his acts* (IT 30-50 A).

3.4 Theme #4: "Trust Conditioned to Outcomes (Instrumentality)"

This theme refers to meaning units in which trust and distrust, instead of being a predisposition, or motivated by the credibility of the people/institutions, are conceded as far as these people/institutions bring some concrete results, and thus can be considered trustworthy. Trust and distrust are also considered in their instrumental function, in the sense that both attitudes can be purposely adopted for different, individual or collective, goals. This was the most recurrent theme, in terms of the number of meaning units associated to it. It was quite unevenly distributed across age groups, and was particularly important for 18-19-year-old participants, and relatively little mentioned by the youngest and the oldest participants in our research, particularly the 11-12-year-old participants. One of them openly admitted that "I decided to trust politicians and their measures… if they had failed, I would have been ready to blame them!" (IT 11-12 A). Another participant stressed how the evolution of the number of cases was the key determinant to inspire trust (or lack of it) in the governmental measures (IT 11-12 A); the decision of relaxing measures was also important for inspiring trust (IT 11-12 A and B), and, for another participant, the "discovery of vaccines was the key solution that made me trust the management of the pandemic" (IT 11-12 A). Collective trust in governmental measures was identified as being extremely important because it assured compliance (IT 11-12 A) – in this sense, trust is a strategic behaviour. Also strategic is the consideration that "not trusting other people is a signal of excessive self-esteem, and this prevents you from achieving your goals" (IT 11-12 B).

Among 14- and 15-year-old participants, this theme was more recurrent. A number of mechanisms – sometimes pushing in divergent directions - have been reported by the participants. Trust and distrust in governmental measures have been repeatedly linked to the evolution of the total number of cases (the former thus being a function of the latter). However, the imposition of harsher and harsher measures (and their length) was per se conducive to less trust in the government (also because "no exit strategy seemed to exist": IT 14-15 A), although this lack of trust was often associated with the "contradictory" characteristics of such measures (e.g., the fact that "wearing masks was compulsory in some places and not in others", or that "some measures appeared too strict": IT 14-15 B). Conversely, the relaxation of measures – linked to the decline of cases – inspired "trust", and convinced people to "be more relaxed" (IT 14-15 A). Trust was high at the beginning because of the "sense of emergency" which forced people to "trust people who generally you wouldn't normally trust" (IT 14-15 A); later, as already noticed among the youngest participants, high trust in government sometimes went hand in hand with a generalied distrust towards citizens failing or refusing to comply with the rules. As this long quote testifies, a generalised decrease in governmental trust led to incompliant behaviour and, thus, to a decrease in interpersonal trust:

> I think, however, that distrust has downsides. So many were distrustful of regulations, of rulers, and many put the mask down. One thing is this example... once, I was a direct witness, a lady in the supermarket went to the cashier because one of her neighbours was there and was positive. The cashier announced

that the positive person inside the supermarket had to report to the cashier otherwise the police would be called. And 11 people showed up! It was, I think, a shopping centre in Conegliano. Not having confidence also leads to that, and that puts other people's health at risk. Or even some episodes like the no-vax demonstrations that were not too peaceful. Police interventions happened. Not trusting leads to bad things; it puts the health of others at risk (IT 14-15 B).

This theme was the most recurrent one among 18- and 19-year-old participants. These participants brought to the fore original arguments, reasoning about the causes and the consequences of governmental trust/distrust, and how trust and distrust can be seen in an instrumental way. For instance, generalised distrust towards the government has been identified as a major source of lack of institutional efficacy – while also directly affecting people who distrust because "when they got Covid, they suffered its consequences more severely" (IT 18-19 B). However, the link between trust, compliance and thus institutional efficacy has been problematised, by pointing out its possible downsides, namely the fact that the overall strategy could be partially or entirely wrong:

Among the positive sides, well, general obedience leads to good results. If there is trust, there is obedience and everything goes as it should. The negative side of obedience is that maybe if something bad happens, wrong, miscalculated, this may be a severe problem [...] Very much in agreement with this opinion! especially on obedience. There is no point in making plans if this plan is then only followed by those who have made it. Trusting helps because it allows the plan to be realised. If everyone then trusts and the plan is not good, we are all in the same boat and the boat sinks. If only a few trust instead, the plan is not realised (IT 18-19 A).

The expression "we were all in the same boat" was advanced in both focus groups, and this, according to a participant, inspired trust, also in the government because "it was impossible that someone in power was pursuing other goals than the fight against the virus [because they were also] in our own boat" (IT 18-19 B). According to a participant, the lack of compliance had also an "educational" function, since "many people who were underestimating the issue, were hit by the virus and by more severe restrictions" (IT 18-19 B), while another participant, while still "personally complying with the rules", was emphatic about criticising the "repressive environment in public schools, if compared with what you could do in recreational activities... I really did not like these contradictions" (IT 18-19 A).

Also, in these focus groups, similarly to the previously analysed ones, the imposition of harsher and harsher measures tended to inspire distrust in the governmental management – also because "we were feeling that all of our renouncements were useless [...] the negative evolution has put in doubt the effectiveness of our renouncements. Thus, individual sacrifices for the public good have been perhaps less useful than expected" (IT 18-19 B). In this sense, an increase in distrust was also associated with the rise of more individualistic reasonings. However, a couple of participants also argued that the

relaxation of the measures was detrimental to their trust in governmental management:

> *For me, summer 2020 was a very critical point for my trust in government. We spent the whole winter with very severe restrictions, and in summer, everything changes with the good season, and then in September restrictions again. I thought… really? What is this? Were they pretending? That really made me lose my confidence. Having heard for months in the winter that it was serious, not to be taken lightly, and then leaving everything in June as if nothing had happened; this drastic change seemed like a joke to me. From Covid to talking about how many people went to the beach??? It got me thinking* (IT 18-19 A).

The phase marked by the discovery of vaccines and then by the vaccination programme was also repeatedly brought up in discussions on the evolution of trust in the political management of the pandemic. Several participants reported that this was a U-turn, since it was identified as the "final solution" to the pandemic. Yet, precisely because of such great expectations, when some vaccines were withdrawn from distribution for further analyses (IT 18-19 B), or when the number of cases were again on the rise despite the advancement of the vaccination programme (IT 18-19 A), participants reported being particularly negatively affected in the trust in governmental management. When turning to discussing interpersonal trust/distrust (a dimension which was very tangential within this theme), distrust was repeatedly mentioned as a 'shield', as something protecting you from disillusionment, while trust has been recalled as a key strategy for having someone to count on and, particularly, to avoid loneliness.

As for the focus groups with the oldest participants, this theme did not play so relevant a role in arguments over the Covid-related measures and people's trust in them. As shown in Section 3.3, claims highlighting the importance of rational justifications of the measures were far more central than justifications based on the concrete results obtained by the governmental policy. Sometimes, these two lines of reasoning merged: a participant argued that he gave limited trust to the governmental measures because it seems a "trial and error" strategy, while, at the same time, recognising that it was "rational" to do so because of the lack of reliable data, at least at the beginning (IT 30-50 A). A couple of statements pointed to the lack of organisation in the health sector, particularly emphasised by a health worker:

> *One incident, one thing that struck me, is what happened after the first lockdown in the hospital organisation. I can't go into detail, but let's say that the bodies at the national, regional, local level were highly disorganised. On the management of it, not so much during the first lockdown, but in the preparation for the second lockdown. I have friends, I know quite a few people who at one point decided to quit because they couldn't take it anymore. Conditions could have been improved. But no maneuver was considered in this regard. It was kind of sad to see professionals who went into burnout in a few months, leaving the job they loved. I still have faith that someone will come along and fix things, but these things have, however, caused me so much distrust* (IT 30-50 B).

Some arguments already mentioned in the previously analysed focus groups came to the fore, such as the importance of individual trust to offer an "anchor" in difficult times (IT 30-50 B), and of collective trust to increase the efficacy of the governmental measures – which can also be detrimental if the overall strategy proves to be wrong – and the 'turning point' in trust's levels represented by the withdrawal of the Astra-Zeneca vaccine for specific age groups. Lack of trust has been told to lead to more prudent behaviour in interpersonal relations (IT 30-50 A), as well as a way to develop self-identity (as a way to understand "who I am, based on people whom I don't trust in" (IT 30-50 A). Interpersonal trust, as in other focus groups, was instrumentally described as a form of looking for personal support, and distrust as a form of protection from disillusionment, while at the same time provoking loneliness (IT 30-50 B).

3.5 Theme #5: "Trust and Personal Experience (or lack of it)"

This theme refers to meaning units in which trust/distrust is generated by personal positive/negative experiences with specific people/institutions, or motivated by 'vox populi' arguments. This is different from "concrete examples of proper/right behaviour" included into the Responsibility and Trust theme because in this latter sense, examples instead of experiences have been cited. This theme is overwhelmingly concentrated among older focus groups, and particularly among 18- and 19-year-old participants.

Arguments in this theme refers to both governmental and interpersonal trust. This theme was mentioned only once by both 11-12 and 14- and 15-year- old participants, by focusing on how "bad manners and public behaviour" (IT 11-12 B) and on how "bad reputation, even if unfairly" (IT 14-15 A) negatively affects trust. In several opinion of 18-19 years old teenagers, this theme emerged more forcefully, and it affected trust in government for instance through "conversations with colleagues, who were skeptical and showed me some data" (IT 18-19 A), or through "close experiences, such as a close friend who got myocarditis after the vaccine", although "when I got the vaccination, everything went fine and I felt more trustful" (IT 18-19 A). Other participants admitted that their personal job affected their (negative) evaluation of the government, as in the case of a teacher who considered "everything exaggerated" and "felt she had betrayed her mission, as a teacher, not as an army officer", while "children were, without reason, heavily limited in their activities" (IT 30-50 A). The perception of a very strong threat to be tackled brought instead a feeling of distrust, not so much in the government, but in the very possibility of foreseeing a solution – powerlessness brings distrust, in a nutshell (IT 18-19 B). A participant explicitly reported (and the other participants agreed) that, in difficult times, "vox populi" can be key: "In situations where personally one feels uncertain about the right decision, the opinion of the majority of close people can be decisive" (IT 18-19 A).

3.6 Residual codes

Seven codes have not been included in the five themes that we identified. Two of them refer to meaning units from 11-12-year-old participants; one of them to a meaning unit from 14-15-year-old participants; four of them from focus groups with 30-50-year-old participants.

The two codes from the youngest participants can be perhaps associated with the Closeness theme (a participant reported distrusting institutions with too much financial resources at their disposal, because they are likely to be influenced by financial interests, IT 11-12 B), and to the Instrumental theme ("I trusted the government, despite some measures being too strict", IT 11-12 A) respectively, although these claims appeared very general. A 14-15-year-old participant pointed to the lack of effectiveness in the role of his teachers to influence his opinions on the pandemic. In the case of the four 'residual' codes from 30-50-year-old participants, quite interesting political claims were made. A participant pointed out the 'health' vs 'economy' debate as a major driver for his distrust:

> *Generally speaking, there was a time, in the second lockdown, when there was a struggle between saving the economic aspect and the health aspect. Some categories were sacrificed, e.g., children at school, but other categories - I am not judging, in the contingency it was decided so - here the non-productive part of the population was sacrificed. The productive population was left free. And the virus ran on the legs of those who worked. This generated mistrust* (IT 30-50 A).

Another participant highlighted how initial trust in experts waned jointly with a sense of "tiredness", while also pointing out the feeling of a misuse of restrictive measures to impose discipline – a sort of social dispositive, in Foucaultian terms:

> *With my university friends, we set up an online discussion group. It seemed to us that these restrictions were becoming a constant standard. Sociality in school environments had already been put on hold. For us in the Humanities, who need sociality, we were really afraid it was becoming standard. Even today, lectures at my old university are no longer public. This public role of the universities has been lost. That really pissed me off, and undermined the trust. It seemed to me, without a lot of complot-theory thinking.... the government was taking advantage of a situation to limit people's sociability even more, and I say this as someone who has become more antisocial! My trust went down at that moment* (IT 30-50 A).

Among the consequences of the pandemic in terms of trust, the same participant argued that "the disconnection between politics and me has worsened. This is a feeling I share with many people, and which I perceive as general" (IT 30-50 A).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Our thematic analysis – and our construction of themes – was primarily guided by the search for different sources of trust and distrust in the actors and institutions involved in the management of the Covid pandemic, as well as applied to interpersonal relationships. Responsibility, closeness, rationality (and lack of them), as well as considerations of the instrumental role played by trust, and the centrality of personal experiences for assessing the management of the pandemic and interpersonal trust, were identified as the main sources of trust and distrust. Each of these sources paved the way for different meanings of trust and distrust assigned to the participants to our focus groups to the institutional actors and their way of dealing with the pandemic, as well as in the realm of interpersonal relationships.

Responsibility and rationality – and the lack of them – as well as assessments based on the instrumental, strategic role of trust and distrust, seemed particularly relevant in the discussions focused on the Covid-related policies adopted by institutional actors. In both the Responsibility and Rationality themes, anti-political claims emerged repeatedly and forcefully. Politics has been described as the realm of lack of responsibilities' assumption, and of the adoption of spectacular yet ineffective measures. The management of the pandemic has been described as opaque, particularly when referring to data; the government was accused of both imposing excessively strict measures and of failing to enforce these measures– in both cases, this was read as a way of shifting the responsibility onto citizens, although in several cases this appeared to be effective, in the sense that several participants pointed out the extent to which (irresponsible) citizens were the real 'culprits' of the negative evolution of the pandemic – while also blaming both the government and (mostly) the opposition for encouraging irresponsible behaviours for electoral reasons.

Politics was also opposed to scientific, data-driven, and thus 'rational' approaches to the pandemic. Politics was identified with the realm of discretionary, somewhat arbitrary, and in any case making scientifically unsound decisions. Experts too, and in particular experts with stronger public roles, have often been accused of having pursued visibility instead of following proper scientific methods. As Bromme et al. (2022) highlight, trust in science is higher when the scientific community's "expertise, integrity and benevolence" is recognised ('integrity' refers to adherence to rules and standards; 'benevolence' refers to scientific commitment to act according to public interest). In contrast to politicians, experts' expertise has been generally recognised by focus groups' participants, who instead often pointed out experts' lack of integrity and, more crucially, benevolence. Both politicians and experts have provoked an increase in distrust because of their 'arrogant' stances – namely, their unwillingness to admit their limitations and their tendency to 'overpromise', which, in the very early phase of the pandemic, found a fertile terrain among citizens looking for some 'anchors' or 'lifebuoys' (Schraff, 2022), or 'buffers' (Won Choi et al., 2023). In this way, disappointment rapidly emerged together with the worsening of the situation (in contrast to accounts pointing at a positive relationship between "threat perception" and political trust: De León et al., 2022), and the duration of the emergency. If politics is – constitutively, by

definition – the realm of discretionary decisions, as we read in political science text-books, and science is the realm of the scientific method, based on doubts and verifiable hypothesis instead of on assertive, authoritative statements, we could argue that the participants in our focus groups often targeted scientific experts for betraying their mandate, and politicians for fulfilling the expectations we – as citizens and academic scholars – have of their behaviour. In the pandemic context, where public health was under threat, a sort of 'technocratic' form of legitimacy appeared to be the most acceptable. Governmental measures were targeted as scientifically unsound because they were too strict (by skeptical citizens), or because they were de facto too relaxed or they were open to some exceptions (by citizens particularly worried about the pandemic): In this latter case, governmental attempts to limit economic downturns were equally accused of overlooking scientific evidence. In sum, politicisation occurred at the 'scientific' level (which evidence was really 'scientific'?), while politics, according to all the participants, should have merely acted according to scientific evidence (and was targeted when perceived as inattentive to such evidence). The role of politics as a mediator, aggregator and representative of interests was largely unrecognised.

Institutional communication, when perceived as 'close', genuinely interested, 'caring' and not driven by ideological reasoning was particularly appreciated. This applies to both governmental actors (such as the PM Conte, repeatedly appreciated, in contrast to ministries Azzolina [Education] or Speranza [Health], that instead were accused of pursuing flagship, 'spectacular', poorly effective strategies), and to public figures close to the participants – teachers, in particular. Among the youngest participants, the role of parents as information gatekeepers has been overwhelmingly recognised as important for reinforcing trust, because it avoided an excessively direct exposure to the media (inspiring pessimism). More generally, distrust has increased, together with the rise of cases– distrust in the sense of perceived powerlessness by both the government and its own citizens: apart from the early phase of the pandemic, when, generally, people decided to trust in institutional abilities to cope with the pandemic, later negative evolutions seem to have highly affected trust in the government, as emerged from those codes categorised in the so-called Instrumental theme.

As for interpersonal trust, closeness and personal experience matter the most. Sharing (secrets, projects, experiences) seems the key word, which leads to establishing forms of reciprocal affect and care. Reliability is particularly appreciated – and, as politics is, as said above, the realm of irresponsibility and overpromising, the political sphere is consequently damaged. Trustworthiness, in interpersonal relationships, is associated with sincerity, loyalty and authenticity – which are, indeed, forms of reliability: looking for other people's appreciation and condescendence is negatively evaluated, and this – again – explains why 'pure scientists' (i.e., scientists not involved in media communication) and health workers, as well as close friends, seem much better evaluated than politicians and what, in Italy, have been sarcastically dubbed as virostars ("Virus TV Stars") (on this, see Crabu et al., 2021). Interpersonal and political trust also have an instrumental dimension. Interpersonal trust allows citizens to avoid loneliness, to have support, and to take better decisions because new, savvy opinions are available (thus partially mitigating the often-noticed opposition between 'trust' and 'critical thinking').

Interpersonal trust has been also distinguished according to the existence of eventual 'asymmetries of information': trusting experts – such as family doctors – is associated with a very different kind of trust, quite similar to the functioning of political trust: transparent, sincere experts who tend to confirm pre-existing opinions, are positively evaluated. Political trust, in turn, allows for increased institutional efficacy in difficult times, such as the pandemic: many participants point out the perils of collective trust, since it empowers the government (again, in a condition of asymmetry of information) vis à vis the citizenry.

As for age group variation, several patterns emerged quite clearly. First of all, interpersonal trust was much more deeply discussed among younger participants, while trust in Covid-related measures and the actors that implemented them was much more debated among older participants. When looking at the most recurrent themes per age group, the youngest participants tended to trust in people and institutional actors who prove to assume responsibility for their acts, as well as those perceived as 'close' and genuinely caring and attentive. All of this seems to point to the efficacy of somewhat paternalistic attitudes and communicative registers: this is particularly important for policy-making considerations, since high trust in government during "impressionable years" (such as youth) is likely to have life-enduring effects on political trust and participation (Aksoy et al., 2020). The 18- and 19-year-old participants seemed, in contrast, more focused on concrete outcomes delivered in order to assess trustworthiness, while also reporting to be much attentive to (and influenced by) the reputation of actors and people in order to concede their trust. Said otherwise, 18- and 19-year-old participants emphasised the instrumental dimension of trust, while also confirming that socialisation – and exchanging opinions within their socio-cultural environment – play a key role in influencing the perceived trustworthiness of people and institutional actors. Among this age, also 'closeness' (sometimes understood in terms of ideology, in contrast to the youngest participants) and, thus, homogeneity, is an important driver for trust. Finally, adult participants emphasise the importance of offering rational or empirically rigorous reasonings to deserve trustworthiness. Appeals to 'science', instead of 'ideology', seemed thus a more efficacious form of power legitimatisation: however, pre-existing, sedimented preferences in terms of ideology and values clearly emerged in the discussions.

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8. How It Makes Sense to Trust the Trustworthy: Towards a Well-informed Trust – Polish WP5 report

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1. The Covid-19 pandemic in Poland

The first case of COVID-19 in Poland was confirmed by the Minister of Health (at that time: Łukasz Szumowski) on 4 March 2020.[11] On 12 March 2020, the first death case from Covid was confirmed by local authorities in Poznań.[12] The charts below show a 7-day rolling average per million people for daily new confirmed cases and daily new confirmed deaths. Based on that data and official narratives, we can establish 5 major waves of Coronavirus infections in Poland: 1st in spring of 2020, 2nd in autumn of 2020, 3rd in spring of 2021, 4th in the end of 2021 and 5th in the beginning of 2022 and the most recent (6th) in the winter of 2022. The first wave of COVID-19 was mild, as the government quickly reacted with a lockdown policy. The peak of the infections happened in 27 January 2022 with 57,659 new daily cases. The mortality rate of COVID-19 was the highest during the 3rd wave, with a peak on 8 April 2021 (956 daily new confirmed deaths). Despite the highest rate of new infections, the 5th wave was far less fatal than the previous three waves. Notably, the WHO argued that the share of positive COVID-19 tests rate should not exceed 5%.[13] From the 2nd to the 5th waves, rates varied from 10 to almost 40%.[14] Schools were working only online from March 2020 to May 2021 (to January 2021 in the case of preschools and grades 1-3 in primary schools). In addition, between November 2020 and January 2021, children aged below 16 could not go out without adults. Numerous analyses find severe educational and psychological costs of the long-term school lock-down in Poland, in particular affecting children from vulnerable backgrounds (Całek, 2019; NIK, 2021).

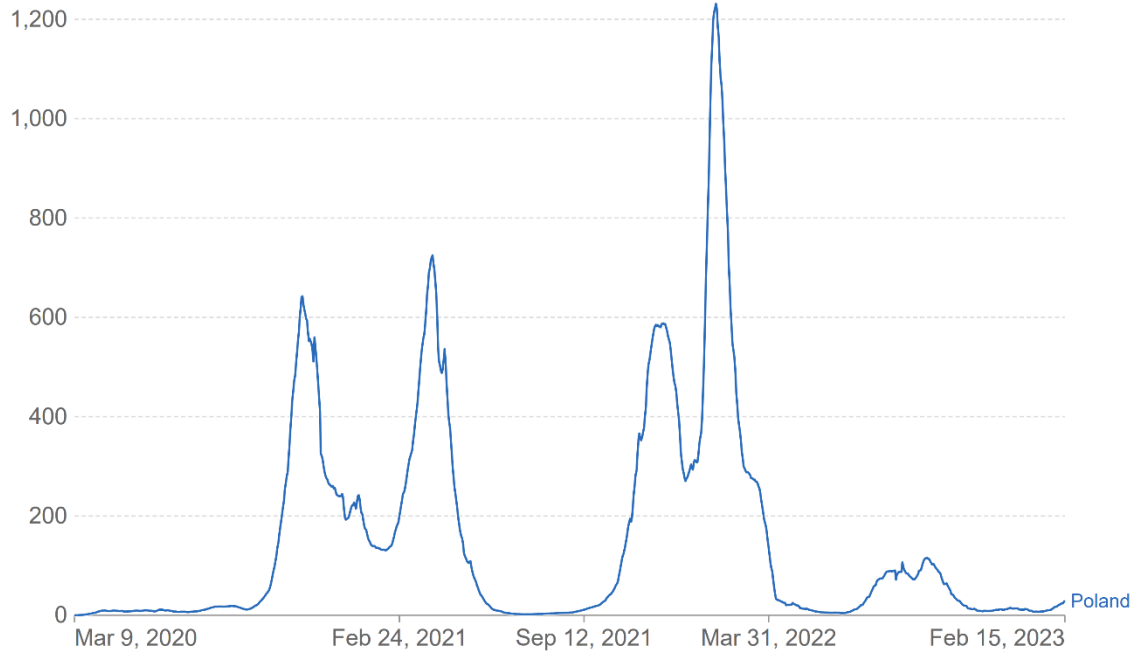[11] https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/pierwszy-przypadek-koronawirusa-w-polsce [retrieved on 14.02.2023]

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Figure 1.: Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases in Poland per million people. Source: Our World in Data

Figure 2.: Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths in Poland per million people. Source: Our World in Data

The reaction of public opinion depended on the current pandemic situation in the country and the measures provided by the government (Pankowski, 2022). In the early stages of the pandemic, the majority of the Polish populace expressed support for the government's response to the Coronavirus spread. In May 2020, approximately 70% of the population assessed the government's decisions as either "very good" or "rather good". However, this sentiment changed as the pandemic measures were extended, and subsequent infection waves emerged. During these waves, public opinion became increasingly critical of the government's response, with over 50% of respondents evaluating the situation as "very bad" or "rather bad". In the interim period between the third and fourth waves, the government's response was deemed "good" by approximately 50% of respondents, and "bad" by approximately 40%. Another increase in negative opinions can be observed from December 2021 to February 2022 (the 4th and 5th waves).

2. Procedure and participants

The table below shows the main characteristics of the participants. The participants were recruited with the use of diverse techniques. They involved: researcher contact with local schools, availability sampling with the use of personal contacts, snowballing and posting advertisements in neighbourhood social media sites. Overall, the recruitment procedure turned out to be very challenging, in particular with regard to younger cohorts. Recruitment, obtaining informed consent from participants and children's parents, as well as handling the data, followed the procedures accepted by the Ethical Commission of University of Warsaw. Two pre-test interviews, in the form of individual interviews, were carried out before the focus group interviews. These helped with slight rephrasing of questions for the younger groups, to make them more comprehensible for children. All focus groups were conducted online between October and December 2022.

2.2. Participants

In total, 25 people participated in focus groups (15 women, 9 men, and 1 non-binary person).

	Age	Gender	School track / highest education	Education mother	Education father	Place of living
Focus group 11-12 A (n = 4)						
1	11-12	female	elementary	no data	no data	no data

2	11-12	male	elementary	no data	no data	no data
3	11	male	elementary	university or college	high school	A big city
4	11	female	elementary	university or college	university or college	A big city
Focus group 11-12 B (n = 3)						
1	11	female	elementary	university or college	university or college	A big city
2	11	male	elementary	university or college	university or college	The suburbs/outskirts of a big city
3	12	female	elementary	high school	high school	The suburbs/outskirts of a big city
Focus group 14-15 A (n = 3)						
1	14-15	female	no data	no data	no data	no data
2	15	female	high school	high school	high school	The suburbs/outskirts of a big city
3	14	male	elementary	university or college	university or college	A big city
Focus group 14-15 B (n = 3)						
1	14	female	elementary	university or college	university or college	A big city
2	13	female	elementary	university or college	university or college	A big city
3	14	female	elementary	high school	high school	A country village
Focus group 18-19 A (n = 3)						
1	19	non-binary	high school	university or college	university or college	A big city
2	19	female	high school	high school	high school	A town or a small city
3	20	male	high school	university or college	university or college	A big city
Focus group 18-19 B (n = 3)						
1	19	female	high school	university or college	university or college	A big city
2	19	male	high school	university or college	high school	A big city

3	20	female	high school	university or college	elementary or lower	A big city
Focus group 30+ A (n = 3)						
1	30	female	university or college			A town or a small city
2	43	male	high school			A big city
3	32	female	university or college			A big city
Focus group 30+ B (n = 3)						
1	31	male	university or college			A big city
2	35	male	university or college			A big city
3	47	female	high school			A town or a small city

Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. During the first coding cycle, we shared the material, following the principles of a dense open coding system while reading the transcripts line by line. Then the coded textual material was merged into a Maxqda file. During the second coding cycle, we constructed the following seven themes which cluster the ways trust was discussed by our research participants, described in subsequent parts of the report:

Theme 1: Trusting the people who never let you down

Theme 2: Trusting people takes time and needs interaction

Theme 3: Urging for cautious and limited trust in interpersonal relations

Theme 4: Trusting others as a path to wellbeing

Theme 5: Trust in transparent and competent institutions

Theme 6: Failure of pandemic policies & (dis)trust

Theme 7: (Dis)trust makes policy work

3. Results from the thematic analysis

3.1. Theme 1: Trusting the people who never let you down

In our interviews, the aspect of reliability defined as not letting someone down was important to each of the age groups. Reliability best manifests itself through behav-

iours and their interpretations. Behaviours indicating reliability are: positive experiences of dealing with problems that occurred in the relationship between trusting and trusted person, not sharing something that should be kept between parties, consistency of thoughts and actions, refraining from purposefully hurting others, etc. In the case of absence of those behaviours or actions which violate them, distrust was discussed as a defensive strategy minimalising the risk of betrayal in relations with others. Such understanding of trust relations is mostly connected with interpersonal trust, yet some interviewees also shared such a perspective when talking about public institutions. In the case of trust towards institutions, it is mostly understood in terms of predictability and stability.

3.1.1. Interpersonal (dis)trust

When asked about people they trust in interpersonal relations, our interviewees pointed out individuals from their close environment, such as family members or friends. These trust relations were explained by two primary factors: long-standing acquaintanceship with trustees, and their reliability. In this chapter, we explore the latter factor for trust-based relations and what happens when people are unreliable.

Reliability was always explained through the interviewees' experiences, and defined as not letting others down by one's actions. Among the three youngest age groups (11-12, 14-15, 18-19), the most frequent example was disclosing personal information with others, and relying on their promise not to share it with anyone else. Keeping this assurance was one of the strongest indicators of reliability brought up in the focus groups. In the oldest age group (30-50), reliability was more often construed as experiencing certain situations together, especially difficult ones. Noteworthy, these operationalisations of trust are not mutually exclusive, and were present in all age groups with increasing frequency of experience-based trust throughout the subsequent developmental stages:

> *I can talk with this person about everything and they wouldn't tell anyone. If it is an important matter to me, I can always share it with them* (PL FG 11-12_2).

> *Why do I trust this person? We have had such a long relationship that in many situations this person has already proved themself and that is why I trust them* (PL FG 30_20 2).

The next factor necessary for trust-building mentioned by our interviewees was the sense of being cared for by another person. A girl (14-15) mentioned a situation of changing schools. She befriended another student that helped her get used to the changes. In the age group 18-19, one person mentioned that the "good vibe" with one of her newly-met friends helped her trust them despite their short acquaintanceship. Such a perspective was less vocal in the oldest age groups, in which participants noted time as an important factor in trust building, often considered also as risk calculation

– one has to see the opportunities and threats of trusting others, and make a calculated decision.

Meanwhile, distrust in the interpersonal context is shaped by three main factors. The first of these is unreliability, in opposition to reliability. It is manifested mainly in situations where a trusted person violates mutual secrets and discloses them to a third party. Other examples of unreliability include: using other people to achieve (more or less) calculated goals, lying or the instability of the opinions and views of a person.

Among eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, distrust also developed from being harmed by others. As these were difficult experiences, the speakers spoke in general terms. The behaviours described above (especially revealing secrets) were hurtful to them. Also, the aspect of time was important in some of the statements. One person described a change in their friend who turned out to be "a stranger comparing to whom I thought I knew before" (PL FG 18-19 A). One of the interviewees described such behaviour as "bad", and pointed out their destructive effect on that particular interpersonal relationship. However, individual experiences did not cause the interviewees to completely stop trusting others:

> *I think it derives from experience. My trust was demolished and because of that, I do not trust this particular person. But I haven't shut myself away from all people* (PL 18-19 A).

The second reason for distrusting others is distrust nurtured by observing others' actions. For example, some of the interviewees pointed out gossiping about others as an indicator of untrustworthiness. The objects of gossip were not as important as the action itself. Moreover, the interviewees gave examples of new acquaintances changing their behaviour over time, or even close friends who started treating them poorly. Such actions were interpreted through the personality traits of others:

> *And I have just learned from experience – after seeing how those people treat others, it is better not to try, not to risk* (PL 14-15 B).

> *People do make mistakes, so even if someone says too much a few times, or spills the beans, you will just ask them not to do it anymore. And this is okay, it happens to everybody. But if a person even in the school corridor backbites others, hook them up or beat them, then I simply think such a person has no character to keep your secret safe* (PL 11-12 A).

The third reason was mainly brought up in the age group 30-50. Interviewees pointed out that they do not trust people who only think about themselves. In their opinion, such a relation is one-sided, and others may use the second party, disregarding personal boundaries:

> *The basic factor of distrust is a sense that this person ignores me or my needs. The way they talk or do things does not indicate that my problems are important to them* (PL 30-50 B).

This understanding of trust as trusting only those people who never let us down brings certain profits, especially on an emotional level. Especially younger groups pointed out that the possibility of sharing difficult experiences and emotions with others makes them feel less alone in problematic situations. On the other hand, distrust in this context becomes a protection strategy, deflecting harm or being used by others:

> Q: Why do you not trust this person?

> A: I don't want to be hurt again. I see no profit in trust (PL 18-19 A).

3.1.2. (Dis)trust to institutions

This facet of (dis)trust relations was seldomly associated with institutional (dis)trust. The category of reliability was rarely associated with trust in public institutions. Noteworthy, our interviewees spoke more about distrust towards institutions and their representatives, than explicitly about trusting them:

> It would be nice to trust those people… To know that everything is going to be all right, because it gives you some sense of safety, at least superficially. But here it doesn't exist. I've seen myself how it all appears, even on TV – we have no certainty what will happen in a month, two, three… Some kind of uncertainty (PL 14-15 A).

Distrust in institutions mainly derives from their being perceived as unstable or unpredictable, especially during Covid. During that time, adults showed more understanding of extraordinary situations and safety measures. What is common for all age groups is questioning the rationality of some of the pandemic measures, for example, being prohibited from entering forests and parks at the beginning of the pandemic. However, respondents in the oldest age group justified such decisions by the uncertainty of the situation in the first months of the pandemic.

One of the interviewees in the younger age group mentioned that she did not trust the police because of the unpredictability of their behaviour. This is symptomatic, particularly compared with results from focus groups in Work Package 3, in which police officers were also described as unpredictable.

Other behaviour increasing distrust towards institutions was disobeying the rules set by them and disregarding expert opinions (more details about this issue in the context of the pandemic: see Theme 6).

> Secondly, it's not just a matter of the Polish government, but the issue of people who were in charge of implementing different solution; even they have not been obeying them. This also decreased trust (PL 30-50 B).

Based on these statements, trust in institutions is increased when they are stable and work in a predictable way. However, predictability was not a main feature of the pandemic. This situation only emphasised existing distrust, giving no opportunity to build lasting trust. Faced with uncertainty, most people chose to trust their relatives or the

media, which they openly discussed when we asked about their sources of knowledge about the virus. Public institutions enforced their trust through decisions that provided specific restrictions and prohibitions on Poles. The alternative to them was risking their health, or even the lives of loved ones:

> *I'll just add that in general I didn't believe the government because of the restrictions, I was just, in general, biased because of what had happened before. Even before the pandemic, during the elections, for example. And after that, I am just… I don't want to talk about politics, yet even now whatever they say, I have this thought: I don't believe them* (PL 11-12 A).

3.1.2. Age variability

This theme points to the importance of reliability in building trust-based relationships. Understanding of reliability differs among respondents from different age groups: younger ones (11-12, 14-15, 18-19) understand it as confidentiality, while older ones (30-50) tend to understand it in terms of shared experience. However, these meanings are not mutually exclusive, and show general tendencies in the research material.

Distrust has three main manifestations. The first is unreliability, which is a violation of the behaviour mentioned above. The second is the behaviour of specific individuals towards others. The third manifestation, which was mentioned mainly in the oldest age group, was thinking only of oneself and one's needs.

3.2. Theme 2: Trusting people takes time and needs interactions

In the opinion of our respondents, another important factor of trust building is time. All of the interviewees agreed on that, often explicitly. Implicitly, they highlighted this by revealing whom they do trust – mostly relatives and long-term friends, emphasising the aspect of time in their relations. In this section, we explain the nexus of time and trust-building. Regular interactions help to overcome distrust. In the previous section, we discussed the common experiences, which were also brought up by the interviewees in the context of time. Another aspect is the reciprocity of trust that comes through these experiences.

3.2.1. Aspect of time in trust-building

The issue of time in the process of trusting others is inseparably linked with common experiences. Very often, when talking about the role of time, our interviewees combined those two issues together, for example:

> *In the beginning, I must have a long period of contact with them so we can create a relationship and go through some various things together* (PL 11-12 B).

If I know someone for a long time, and we lived through difficult moments to-gether, I automatically trust them (PL 14-15 B).

Various situations had happened, even pretty serious, so I know I have not been let down by this person, and I can count on them in every situation (PL 18-19 A).

Why do I trust this person? We keep a long-lasting relation, so in numerous situations, this person has proved themselves, and that is why I trust them (PL 30-50 B).

Some of the relations mentioned as an example of trust had lasted since the interviewees were younger – for example with parents or siblings. This mainly applies to interviewees from the youngest age group (11-12). The two middle groups mostly mentioned family members and friends, whom they had known from school. Respondents from the oldest age group (30-50) mentioned their spouses or colleagues from work.

People from age groups 18-19 and 30-50 emphasised some behaviours at the beginning of the relationship as potentially alarming, especially sharing "too much" personal information. Interviewees interpreted the term "too much" in the context of what they would have done in such a situation. They also adapt to this strategy:

First and foremost, if someone at the beginning of knowing each other over-shares with facts from their life, very private stories – this is weird and alarming (PL 18-19 B).

Life has given me a lesson to limit the information I share with certain people without getting to know them better, right? (PL 30-50 A).

Sometimes, the long period might be shortened. One of our interviewees said they do go into new relations with a trusting attitude. They diagnosed two reasons for this variation from counterparts: firstly, "nobody has ever abused my trust", secondly "I do not have that many secrets I don't want the world to know" (PL 18-19 B). In the opinion of the respondent, these two aspects help them trust others more quickly. Noteworthy, they also perceived this attitude as unusual, and did not discredit the importance of long-lasting relations. Other interviewees mentioned common friends as a factor that helps them trust someone faster:

I often approach with some kind of caution, especially people whom I have no common friends with, as they were complete strangers – then with great caution. If we have common friends, then a little less and only after some time do I lay my cards on the table (PL 18-19 B).

Only in the oldest age group (30-50) did two people mention intuition as important for deciding on trusting someone else, and thus shortening the long period of time needed to establish a trust-based relationship. This might seem contradictory, especially compared with the clearly empirical approach described in the first theme. Noteworthy, this intuition is shaped through mutual contact, and might be proved in further interactions. Interviewees tend to trust people with whom they find a common language.

3.2.2. Frequency of interactions

Long-lasting relationships allow our interviewees to have multiple interactions with others and prove the strength of the link between them. For younger generations, the best opportunity to do so is at school. On the one hand, COVID restrictions and remote education limited the time children could spend with peers. Asked about relations with others during that time, they mentioned mostly keeping contact online.

One person from the age group 14-15 pointed out that the level of trust towards her friend from school decreased because of limited contact. Yet, she also mentioned that if she managed to keep in contact with someone, the level of trust did not change. Another person mentioned that online contact helped him to get to know a classmate better. This increased their mutual level of trust.

This proves that the frequency of interactions plays important role in building trust. The form of contact is a matter of personal preference – some interviewees found it easier to keep in touch during remote education and using online techniques. The influence of online contact on interpersonal trust might be an interesting research subject.

3.2.3. Reciprocity of trust

Interviewees especially in the three youngest age groups (11-12, 14-15, 18-19) highlighted reciprocity of trust as another important factor in their relations. This reciprocity confirms the importance of common experiences. Interviewees do not just simply trust others; they also experience being trusted which manifests mostly through actions described in the previous theme. Their close ones share secrets, ask for help and rely on them:

> *I trust the person I chose because I have known her for a long time and for me, an important aspect of trusting someone is when they also showed trust in me and I feel this trust is two-sided* (PL FG 14-15 B).

> *I've never been let down and have never been spurned when I needed help. The fact that it is not only me who turns to this person with problems first, but it also works the other way around. It gives me the impression of this trust as mutual. It raises it a bit* (PL FG 18-19 A).

This mutuality may serve as a validation of the strength of the relationship. Reciprocal trust does not appear by itself. It is worked on through long-lasting acquaintanceship and friendship. This active aspect of trust relation, in which one plays a role in shaping the relations, might suggest trust as a volatile relation, depending on both outer factors (behaviour of others) and internal (one's own behaviour).

3.2.4. (Dis)trust to institutions

Some of the interviewees reflected on trusting institutions in this context, mainly pointing out the interactional aspect of trust-building. This relation requires the possibility of verifying what was done for the community, and how it aligns with the values of a certain politician which means access to information if a given politician did what s/he had promised (age group 30-50). Younger interviewees reflected on politicians and institutional figures from their life, e.g., teachers. From their perspective, the possibility of asking questions and demanding answers is important:

> In this matter, (…) I trust because in our school, the teachers talk about everything. We can ask about anything and we always get answers. I mean – not anything in general, but many things (PL 11-12 B).

3.2.5. Age variability

All interviewees emphasised the importance of long acquaintanceships and shared experiences in building trust. In this context, younger ones (11-12, 14-15, 18-19) mentioned family members and school friends as trustworthy people. Older ones (30-50) mentioned spouses and work colleagues. The two oldest age groups spoke about suspicious behaviour at the beginning of an acquaintanceship as a sign of distrust. Namely, it is particularly alarming when someone shares too many private details at the beginning of a relationship. Two people from the older group also said they go with their intuition regarding decisions on whom to trust and distrust. The importance of frequency of interaction was mainly pointed out by younger respondents who meet their trusted people at school. Younger ones (11-12, 14-15, 18-19) also emphasised the importance of reciprocity in trusting others.

3.3. Theme 3: Urging for cautious and limited trust in interpersonal relations

Two previous themes unveiled the idea that trusting others should be conditional – either based on trusted persons' specific features (Theme 1), or on the interactive process of developing a relationship between the trustor and trustee (Theme 2). Here, the focus of interviewees is put on attitude of the trustor that they should be cautious and reasonable when making decisions about trusting or distrusting others. The central argument of this theme is that one should not be naïve, blind-trusting or too wholehearted because it poses significant emotional, cognitive and economic threats. Thus, our interviewees were implicitly or explicitly stating that being in a trust-based relationship demands from the trustor an almost constant state of alert, taking into account other deeds, and taking seriously into account the context of the situation.

Overall, two stances were presented by the interviewees on whether it makes sense to trust other people and institutions. The first one was the idea that some degree of distrust is always more beneficial than trust – if a person does not know whether to trust someone, distrusting is a better choice than giving trust. The second one assumed

that trust is a good thing, but only if it targets trustworthy people or institutions. The claim to be cautious can be divided into two stances.

The first one assumed that we should never be too fast to trust others, or to trust "unverified" people or institutions. One should always check whom s/he trusts and be neither naïve nor "blind" in attitude towards others. According to interviewees, whenever others turn out to be untrustworthy or take advantage of us, we should immediately withdraw our trust. Thus, it was emphasised that it is "our responsibility" to check thoroughly and be cautious about whom we trust. Some interviewees made a reference to the idea of "trusting themselves", which meant that we should trust ourselves to make well informed choices regarding whom to trust, as well as protect ourselves from harm.

Interviewees in the youngest and oldest groups underlined that such a cautious attitude makes sense, especially in specific groups and circumstances. Namely, younger teenagers argued that they know that there are some "bad people" who might want to harm them, and thus being on high alert is a much more beneficial attitude than blind trust. Older adults were, in turn, highlighting that in their professional life, or some political contexts, it can be taken for granted that people generally wish harm on others, and in such professional career- related environments not trusting people is most rational strategy.

The general plea to be cautious when trusting others also entailed the idea that it is better to "trust partially", "only to some extent", "establish a healthy relationship, that is trusting to some degree, but not too much". This assumes that even when we trust a person, we can or should trust her in regard to some specific issues, not regarding everything. In particular, whenever trusting others, it makes sense to "keep the most private things just for ourselves", or not to rely too much on others in things that are very dear to us. This is how an 18-year-old boy talks about the need to keep some facts about himself private:

> *I entered into a relationship with a lot of credit and I was disappointed. I am now drawing conclusions that this cannot be done; you have to distance yourself from the other person. I think you have to be completely open, but also keep some facts and circumstances, some of your private life (…)* (PL 18-19 A).

3.3.1. Why it makes sense to trust only partially

To this theme belong also participants' explanations why they think it makes sense to be highly cautious in making decisions about trusting others. Three general types of arguments were present. Participants were pointing to cognitive, emotional and economic risks of ill-placed trust and too high trust.

The cognitive drawbacks of ill-targeted trust were widely described by our participants in different age groups. They argued that one may "stop thinking independently" when trusting others too much, or one may stop being alert or critical in seeing processes

around oneself. Risk of losing independence in making own judgements, threat of falling into a kind of a "cognitive laziness", as well as the possibility of relying on wrong information and being deliberately tricked or misinformed by others were pointed out. This is how two interviewees put it:

> *Distrust also has benefits, because if you don't trust the person who seems to have more power than you 100%, you can always have your own opinion. If you are completely trusting, they may make a stupid decision and you may not even notice it because you trust them* (PL 14-15 A).

> *We don't let our eyes roll. In this case, you cannot close yourself to one source, but analyse a few options and decide which one is the best in our opinion. Such blind trust in materials watched, for example, on television, I do not think it is good. You have to keep your distance so as not to spread some misinformation, or not get excited that something is very bad, because sometimes it turns out that it is not as it is presented. Just the distance* (PL 18-19 A).

In this context, our participants' awareness of living in the age of misinformation and disinformation on the Internet and in some public media urges people to be cautious in trusting others, and in particular, to be sceptical about various information sources.

Emotional drawbacks of ill-targeted trust were mostly related to interviewees' experiences of others revealing their secrets. In particular, teenagers were arguing that trusting others makes them highly vulnerable – when it happened to them to trust "the wrong person", many people at school learned about their private issues. A 14-year-old girl told us how actually distrust saved her at school:

> *More related to the subject of school, I also had situations where my distrust of certain people at school saved me a little. Because later I saw the consequences of what would have happened if I had trusted* (PL 14-15 A).

In a similar fashion, a boy in the same group talks about the risk of people spreading sensitive information about others:

> *The point is that if I don't trust a person, I'll try to avoid them, or not tell them anything. It will be better for me too, because it won't be like I say something to someone, and then they spread it. Only I already have some people crossed off this list, and I have people I can tell this to* (PL 14-15 A).

The third risk of ill-placed trust was more general, related to life choices and economic issues. Here, interviewees emphasised that other people might want to take economic advantage of you, sell you dubious goods, advertise something not worthy of our money, etc. In these cases, it is always better to be distrusting than to lose money. In a similar fashion they were arguing about some people who might simply wish to take advantage of them or cheat on them. This is how lady from 30-50 years old group was arguing:

> *Maybe we will open up a bit more, and yet this person, well, will he deceive us, or will he use it in some way that will be negative for us, well, such things also*

happen, right? Also, as if to conclude this argument, yes, trust is needed, it is very important, but also ... I wanted to say, you have to be a little careful, well, generally too trusting, with your heart in your hand, so to speak, you can't reach out to everyone and go out like this in every situation (PL 30-50 A).

3.3.2. Age variability

Within this theme the biggest differences between age groups referred to argumentation and examples of why distrust or cautious trust is beneficial. Teenagers were highly focused on trustor vulnerability because of the risk of their secrets being made public. In a broader sense, the proof of being trustworthy was closely related to their keeping secrets. Older adult group members, in turn, were more focused on economic and general drawbacks of not trusting the right people. Yet overall, the arguments displayed a highly consistent pattern across age groups.

3.4. Theme 4: Trusting others as a path to wellbeing

A salient theme in our interviewees' reflections about trust reflected the general idea that trust is either indispensable or highly beneficial for strong relationships with people. Thus, this idea of advantages of trust referred only to interpersonal relations. Focus group participants were likely to express the idea that an individual's ability and choice to give others the credit of trust is an essential route to having close colleagues, classmates or friends, not being alone or lonely and, in turn, living a good life. Arguments which construct this theme refer to specific mechanisms, pointed out by the participants, according to which trust results in a "more social" life.

Teenagers we talked to, in particular those aged 14-15, pointed to their own difficulties in trusting others, mostly at school, and how they regret having problems trusting others, or how they struggle to trust peers. They emphasised how such difficulties result in having fewer friends, poorer social contacts, or spending less time with others, and how this is stressful or discouraging for them. A few teenagers told us that "sadly, they find it hard to trust peers" and exactly because of this, often feel lonely or excluded from their peers. They juxtaposed their own attitudes with others for whom trusting reaps rewards, and suggested that they miss having a social life, and cannot find a suitable peer group. This is how one of teenagers expressed it:

> *It seems to me that if you are a slightly prejudiced person, it's good, but if you are already a very prejudiced person, i.e., when you meet someone and you have only bad scenarios in your head that he will definitely reveal your secret, then, this is not a good approach because you just won't find a friend. Just being so prejudiced against people and against life is, in my opinion, a bad strategy* (PL 11-12 A).

As a teenager argues, those who cannot give a credit of trust will not find friends. It needs to be underlined that this girl uses the words "find" a friend and "strategy".

These words suggest that according to her, entering a close relationship involves some risk, whilst trust is associated with a certain readiness to take such a risk, and an assumption of a good outcome.

3.4.1. Emotional, cognitive and pragmatic benefits of trusting others

Specific positive functions of interpersonal trust and mechanisms according to which trusting others results in "being among people" can be grouped into three broad categories. They can be labelled as emotional, cognitive and pragmatic functions.

Under the sub-theme of emotional benefits of trusting others, we subsume all participants' examples and arguments of how trusting others *reduces stress* and *anxiety*, contributes to *feelings of security,* or gives people *emotional balance.* Thus, people emphasised that trust is necessary to enter a relationship, or is "a basis to be among people", and that no one can function in social relationships without at least some level of trust. Radical distrust, in turn, was compared to *paranoia* and a pathway to loneliness. Participants also argued that trust is beneficial because "having someone nearby whom we trust" increases our quality of life. They were saying that talking to such people, being emotionally taken care of, having emotional bonds, not being alone with own problems, gives people a sense of security and "emotional balance". Overall, benefits from personal trust were often discussed in this narrative as benefits from making friends or having friends. A young adult argued, for instance, that people feel more confident when "they have someone they can trust":

> *In my case, it is the satisfaction of some emotional bond; a person feels more confident when he has a person he can trust* (PL 18-19 B).

Another participant explained this in a similar fashion, how her trusted person makes her feel relieved:

> *I return to this psychological well-being, which means that if I trust someone, I feel safer overall. My situation is under control, because someone is also watching over it. Not completely, you know, but there's an aspect of life that I don't have to think about too much* (PL 30-50 B).

Interviewees also gave the example of something that may be called cognitive benefits of trusting others. They argued that distrust by default prohibits people from establishing worthy relationships, and from meeting interesting people. One of the participants explained that trust is always beneficial because it helps us to establish all relationships. Even though some of these may be harmful or disappointing for people, experiencing them and learning about people, ourselves and life in general always leads to a fuller and richer existence.

Finally, one of the sub-themes focused on pragmatic functions of personal trust. Here, people were arguing that giving others the credit of trust is the only way to benefit from other people's presence. This refers to receiving help form others, or professional

cooperation. For instance, a man in a group of interviewees, 30-50-years old, was explaining that only thanks to giving some credit of trust to his employees is he able to run his own company and earn money as a businessman. A lady in the same group provided the following example of how lack of trust may be harmful in practical terms:

> *Now I live in a place where Google Maps does not reach, and we have a lady here who is 95 years old and she was very distrustful. And so distrustful that she did not want people's help. She got to the point where she was so weak because she didn't cook for herself and she had a hard time walking. It was only after some time that my mother and I really kind of nailed down a bit of this trust, and it's good that the person is now eating. So, this is such an extreme, extreme distrust, right?* (PL 30-50 A).

In this instance, the elderly woman's opening up and giving some credit of trust, at the persistence of the interviewees, helped her to survive.

3.4.2. Age variability

This theme displayed a consistent pattern of arguments across all age groups. However, teenagers' groups tended to emphasise how trust leads to establishing new relationships and entering into new groups, or societies. They also underlined how stressful it can be to know that they find it difficult to trust others. Adults' groups, in contrast, tended to focus on how trust leads to maintaining good relationships, and what the positive consequences are of "having someone trustworthy". Overall, they also seemed to speak of trust as if they spoke of friendship with others.

3.5. Theme 5: Trust in transparent and competent institutions

Trust in institutions is mostly based on their knowledge and competences. The COVID-19 pandemic was a crash test for institutions and the trust of citizens.

On the one hand, the uncertainty of the situation helped public institutions to gain the trust of citizens. On the other, the pointlessness of some safety measures made other decisions questionable. Our interviewees used media and international organisations in order to compare COVID restrictions in other countries. What is significant for the media landscape in Poland was that many of citizens used the internet as their main source of information.

3.5.1. Trusting science

Our interviewees tend to trust people with more competencies, or who are better informed than them. In the youngest age groups (11-12), interviewees pointed out their relatives as people they have trusted regarding the information on the COVID pandemic and restrictions.

Other age groups pointed out doctors and professionals as trustworthy regarding COVID-related information. They also discussed the government disregarding experts' opinions and providing solutions that were later criticised by professionals. Such practice diminished the level of trust towards the government.

Noteworthy, two people in younger age groups (11-12 and 18-19) mentioned that medical personnel forged the statistics about COVID-19. One person claimed that statistics were underestimated, as medical doctors did not want to cause people to panic. Another suggested that COVID-19 as a cause of death was also put in the documents of people who did not suffer from it. In the opinion of the interviewee, such a practice was implemented by some doctors in order to receive more money from the National Health Fund. As there is no proof for such organised practice,[15] disinformation campaigns about the pandemic and its influence on trusting institutions may be the subjects of further exploration.

The two oldest age groups (18-19, 30-50) more frequently declared trusting science than younger interviewees. In the age group 18-19, this trust in science and believing what scientists say was opposed to the government's decisions on safety restrictions. Interviewees point out that they followed the news on WHO recommendations and strategies implemented in other countries. They also got information from doctors and scientists and it contradicted what government officials had said:

> *If there were some talks about official information from people who work in this area, this discipline of science. Virologists, people who have the qualifications to speak on this subject. It was more trustworthy than people who are in the government. People in the government know as much about the virus as I do* (PL 18-19 A).

The older age group (30-50) was less critical of the government's decision, and assessed them considering the extraordinary situation. The important aspect of the decision-making process was the scientific board that consulted the Ministry of Health's decisions. Trusting institutions might be a way to feel safer:

> *(…) the Minister of Health has a group of experts who know far more than we do, and we are able to be informed quickly. We have this weight of how to act among others off our heads. It is a positive aspect* (PL FG 30-50 B).

Another aspect of trusting science was the vaccination process. Some of the interviewees expressed their initial reservations about the vaccines because in their opinion, they were rolled out too fast. However, after consulting their point of view with experts' statements on the safety of the vaccines, they changed their minds. Interviewees did not discuss further vaccinations and rather agreed on the importance of fighting the pandemic:

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[15] This article also discusses the problem, pointing out that COVID-related death statistics might have been undercalculated due to low numbers of tests performed in Poland: https://biqdata.wyborcza.pl/biqdata/7,159116,28002965,sprawdzamy-lekarze-nie-maja-interesu-zeby-wpisac-w-akt-zgonu.html

In the beginning, if one had the knowledge about how vaccines are made, certified, distributed, and now all this was done in one year, when usually it takes 10 years. I understood one might be sceptical or cautious. I checked the knowledge, compared and listened to experts, and this helped me to understand we have to follow this way. I had a relatively high level of trust; however, I do agree that a bit of confronting this with accessible knowledge is a positive impulse (PL FG 30-50 B).

3.5.2. Trustworthy information during the pandemic

As many of the interviewees were sceptical about COVID statistics or safety measures, and expressed low trust towards the government, we also asked whom they trusted about the information about the pandemic's dynamic. Interviewees mentioned a few strategies they implemented during the pandemic.

As mentioned above, one of the strategies was to consult the ongoing pandemic situation with what experts had said about it. Interviewees did not name any of the experts, yet they mentioned WHO and the Ministry of Health committee as bodies they trusted more or less.

Others expressed a critical approach to institutions, yet still trusted the information shared by them. People in the age group 18-19 also pointed out that anti-COVID restrictions were used as a political tool in the election period in the summer of 2020. Such actions undermined their willingness to obey the restrictions, and made them less trusting of the government.

People from the younger age groups (11-12, 14-15, 18-19) looked for the information online, mostly by looking through search engines or using social media. They tried to filter that information and trust only reliable sources. Nonetheless, when asked about sources they found reliable, they often named online initiatives, websites and internet celebrities. This opens up the question about how social media can provide more reliable information for young people. People from the age group 30-50 also used the internet, but their focus was on online media outlets that work as news websites. They also mentioned television as an important source of information, however, expressed a critical approach to TV stations.

This section raises questions about the reliability of media sources used by our interviewees, and how it might be measured. In the landscape of polarised traditional media, it is difficult for them to find a trustworthy source of information. Their attention is then used by online information sources, very often working as social media initiatives that do not have implemented proofreading procedures, and are not legally obliged to state the facts. It creates the danger of being used in the disinformation mechanism. Interviewees are aware of this danger and try to minimise the risk, mostly by double-checking the information using diverse sources.

3.5.3. Age variability

Knowledge and competence are important in building trust in institutions. The youngest interviewees, when asked who they trusted in the context of information about the COVID-19 pandemic, mentioned their parents and people from their closest environment, such as teachers. Some of them were openly distrustful of the police in general, due to their unpredictable behaviour. Older interviewees mentioned doctors, experts, and international organisations as trustworthy sources of information on the pandemic. In the case of the 18-19 age group, trust in science represented by scientists and expert bodies was opposed to distrusting the Polish government, whose actions they assessed as irrational. Older interviewees (30-50) were less critical of the government's actions, pointing out the unprecedented situation.

Importantly, interviewees did not fully trust institutions, and based their decisions about the direction of trust relationships on information obtained from various sources. Younger age groups (14-15, 18-19) mentioned social media and the content created there, sometimes by unknown individuals, who independently created initiatives to inform about the pandemic. Older interviewees (30-50) relied more on online media and television. It is worth noting that none of them was able to find a source of information they trusted completely. They always spoke of a certain degree of distrust and verification of information, even that provided by public institutions such as the Ministry of Health.

3.6. Theme 6: Failure of pandemic policies & (dis)trust

When discussing Covid-related issues, our interviewees expressed almost unanimous disappointment in the handling of the pandemic by the political class in Poland. The opinions shared were rarely, if ever, positive. More importantly, policy failures appeared to have negative consequences for trust in public authorities and countermeasures. The feeling of political distrust, which had been already strong among the participants before the pandemic, intensified even further. The concepts discussed under this theme include the perceived unfairness of particular policies, the pointlessness of anti-COVID measures, breaking pandemic rules by public officials, and the conditionality of trust towards the government (in the context of distrust of politics, in general).

Asked about their trust during the pandemic, the focus groups' participants emphasised the defects and pointlessness of many measures that had been implemented. These were associated with personal struggles and trauma. As one of the interviewees recalled, their grandmother had been infected with COVID by a hospital nurse, and family members could not visit her while she was dying (PL 18-19 A). This experience led the participant to perceive the measures as useless. Similarly, the interviewees who endured lockdowns tended to assert that some policies were illogical or ineffective, which diminished their trust in the institutions that implemented them. Specifically, park closures were mentioned in this context:

If I had to say which restriction had the most negative effect on trust, I would say the closure of all parks. Because I, for example, own a dog and during the autumn and winter period I know very well, (…) there are practically no people... There are only people with individual dogs and the distance between those people and me was really large. And I just, by the fact that it was banned, I simply lost trust in those in power, whether they really know what they are doing. Because after all, so many people were going to the supermarkets and yet… And nobody in the supermarkets was getting sick? Did they not get infected, did people not become infected? And yet there were so few people in the park, and it was forbidden anyway (PL 30-50 A).

As a consequence, rules deemed 'pointless' were broken, even by people who otherwise agreed with general pandemic countermeasures. This was the case with the complete lockdown imposed on adolescents: "So I would go out, but with precautions, even if no one was around, I would walk around wearing a mask, I would disinfect myself afterwards, even if I didn't need to (…) I was careful, but sometimes the pointless rules were broken" (PL 18-19 B).

The role of apparent unfairness of restrictions in diminishing trust was affirmed by the participants numerous times. The practical application of policies often depended on the decision of local and institutional authorities. Therefore, uneven implementation became a problem. This led to a situation in which the rules applied only to some groups, causing resentment and distrust toward political and institutional actors. In this context, the young adult interviewees cited an example of school mask-wearing mandates:

It was unfair for one high school to have this and another to have that. I was always "anti-" on masks (PL 18-19 A).

Half the people did not comply, so it was pointless anyway. (…) It did not have much effect because some people didn't comply. It would have been better to do it remotely then, (…) because everyone got sick afterwards, and it turned out that we had less time to study than we would have had with remote teaching (PL 18-19 B).

An important aspect of the perceived unfairness of countermeasures was the behaviour of authorities during the pandemic. While they were breaking the rules, political and institutional actors demanded that citizens comply, both on national and local levels. Interestingly, our interviewees mainly referred to the latter. It might indicate that the conduct of street-level workers is an important factor in citizen trust in the pandemic restrictions. In the discussions, police officers, teachers, and medical workers were listed as examples of public professions that violated the official rules. This kind of behaviour jeopardises the norm of reciprocity implied in numerous pandemic policies. As pointed out by one of the younger participants:

I had an English teacher who imposed that we should wear masks only during her lessons because she had a child, but she, for example, did not wear one and

it was strange that we should care about her child and she should not care about our welfare (PL 18-19 B).

The misconduct of the police was also highlighted by our interviewees, as the institution was directly involved in enforcing lockdowns: "Absolutely everyone on the streets was supposed to wear masks, whereby the police, who were overseeing this, were not wearing masks. And I remember that when people realised that, it really made us stop trusting the police" (PL 30-50 A). However, probably the most blatant example of breaking the rules mentioned in the interviews involved medical professionals, and caused the participant to question their own beliefs regarding the restrictions:

> *Back in the pandemic days, I had an accident. I had a head-on collision, so I ended up in the Emergency Room, and one thing made me laugh the most. Everyone in the ER was walking around without masks. The Ministry of Health had their own [rules], and they had their own [rules]. I went home, sat down and wondered, is this a pandemic, or is this just exaggerated by the media and the government? It was strange* (PL 30-50 B).

As described above, in the case of our interviewees, the perceived failures of pandemic policies were generally related to citizens' trust in political and institutional actors. The focus groups also revealed that distrust related to these failures is directed at the government. In part, it seems to be caused by the already existing general lack of trust in politics, which was repeatedly mentioned by the participants (e.g., PL 14-15 A, PL 18-19 B, PL 30-50 A). An interviewee summarised the sentiment by saying:

> *I will admit frankly that I do not trust any politician. I simply observe what is happening on the Polish political scene, and they are simply not trustworthy people. If I had to name someone I trusted, it certainly would not be politicians* (PL 30-50 A).

The lack of political trust was also reinforced by the pre-pandemic actions of the government; in particular, these were referred to as self-serving, or outright corrupt (e.g., PL 30-50 B, PL 18-19 B). However, some of our discussion partners made an important distinction between distrusting politics and distrusting the pandemic countermeasures themselves. One could agree with the measures, while distrusting the politicians implementing them:

> *I, at least, would separate that – the issue of our trust in those in power, and the issues of certain things related to Covid and these restrictions. For instance, I did not have a problem with the masks* (PL 30-50 A).

Our participants stressed that the government is to blame for policy failures that gave rise to political distrust. From this perspective, trusting politicians and institutional actors is conditional based on the results and effectiveness of particular measures. That is why trust in the government decreased during the pandemic for many of our interviewees. One of the younger participants stressed the effect governmental incompetence had on their trust by using the example of mask policies:

As time went on and more became known, because there was confusion at the beginning, I had less and less trust because I felt there was a lack of organisation. I especially lost trust after the "mask affair", when they had bought unusable masks and that made my confidence go down a bit, and I lost trust (PL 14-15 B).

Another explained this shift by referring to the closure of forests:

I understood the purpose of the restrictions (...) and initially a lot of people looked at it that way, and I tried to abide by the restrictions all the time, all through the pandemic, but at a certain point, there were "anti-" movements, and that was also the aftermath of how they introduced some things, for example, the ban on entering the forests – totally pointless (...) (PL 18-19 B).

At the same time, this kind of evaluation of pandemic policies appears to be linked to the larger set of political beliefs of the interviewees. Some interviewees tended to complain that the government response was too liberal:

(...) they were a bit too late in making decisions on restrictions, or not making them at all. This resulted in an increase in the number of cases and deaths, which at one point were the highest in Europe (PL 14-15 B).

Others disagreed saying the government should have been more cautious about introducing anti-COVID measures, for example, by following the Swedish model (which was more liberal):

I believe that we should have acted differently here and followed the Swedish and Scandinavian model. We did not do that at one point; it turned out badly and that was reflected in a decline in support and public trust in politicians at that time (PL 18-19 A).

Therefore, it is very difficult to identify one set of policy failures explaining the potential loss of trust in the government.

3.6.1. Age variability

When discussing the pandemic policy-making, the general lack of trust in politics (and authorities) was universally shared by all age groups, even the youngest children (PL 11-12 B). The main difference between them involved contrasting pandemic experiences. For younger participants, school closures were a topic of particular importance. Social isolation was also frequently mentioned during the interviews in this younger age groups (PL 14-15 B, PL 18-19 B). Therefore, the failure of these measures had an impact on the level of trust in the public authorities among the younger interviewees. In the case of older participants, the pre-pandemic policies of the government (e.g., the abortion ban) had a more pronounced role in reinforcing distrust during the pandemic (PL 30-50 B).

3.7. Theme 7: (Dis)trust makes policy work

In the previous section, the possible negative consequences of policy failures for trust were discussed in detail. However, the participants in the focus groups also emphasised the role of trust and distrust in successful pandemic policy-making. In the discussions, (dis)trust was seen not only as a by-product of certain policies, but also as an important component, which made them work. While less prominent in the narratives of the participants, this theme contributes to our understanding of pandemic politics. The topics included under it focus mostly on the stabilising function of trust, and the potential institutional benefits of (dis)trusting authorities.

According to our interviewees, trust in political and street-level actors makes policy-making significantly simpler. Thanks to it, the people who are the most affected by public policies feel safe:

> *It would be nice to have some trust in people who... To know that (...) it will be fine, because it provides some sense of security, at least some superficial security* (PL 14-15 A).

As one participant subsequently pointed out, a trusting environment provides a kind of safety net for citizens: "(…) [a] situation in which it is easier for me to have the time to take practical decisions that will improve my quality of life" (PL 30-50 B). In this sense, trusting various important actors (politicians, medical professionals) could have contributed to more confidence in some pandemic countermeasures, such as mask-wearing mandates. Sadly, that was not the case, due to the prevalence of mistrust:

> *You mentioned earlier that maybe we will finally start using… That we will trust the doctors and start wearing masks when we feel sick, because in other civilisations, in other cultures, it is standard, so..."* (PL 30-50 A).

In this view, distrust was instrumental in the failure of the implementation of these policies, and undermines a sense of citizenship:

> *I think it is a big disadvantage if we do not trust whoever is running the country, because I have the feeling, (...) that our security is somehow undermined as their decisions will affect our lives. And because of this, (...) I do not feel a sense of belonging to this country in a national sense. (...) The values the government promotes are so different from mine. I feel that this sort of notion of national belonging has been distorted (...) I don't feel safe when the government is not on the side of citizens, but on their own (...)* (PL 18-19 B).

Our interviewees made clear their belief in the potential benefits of (dis)trusting authorities. In the case of distrust, a participant claimed that it caused institutions to be more transparent in general: "It seems to me, more generally than in pandemic terms, that the lack of trust creates a pressure that makes institutions act more transparently" (PL 30-50 B). Regarding trust, the interviewees emphasised the positive role of expertise. That entailed trusting the medical professionals who recommended certain measures during the pandemic. A participant recalled the results of such a relationship with their general practitioner: "We got more peace of mind (...) we did not have to

panic as much as some people were panicking about all this, we just took a detached approach" (PL 18-19 A). Another claimed that he would have trusted the pandemic policies more if they had been modelled on the countermeasures implemented in other "more advanced" countries, such as the mask-wearing mandates:

> *I was assuming that societies which are, I think, more developed socially than we are, such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and countries in the Far East, have a little more experience when it comes to various epidemics. There, the question of wearing a mask by someone who feels ill, or who has a type of infection, is almost an accepted standard. So, I was assuming that if they are doing that, then something is going on, right? (…) they have more experience in this matter, and so these 'masks' did not bother me. I did not protest against them* (PL 30-50 A).

This point is related to the evidence base of policies, and the need to know 'what works' to approve of the policies and countermeasures.

3.7.1. Age variability

Remarkably, under the described theme, all age groups connected the topic of trust in pandemic policy-making to feeling (un)safe in the country. As a consequence, trust seems to have strong security implications for our interviewees. Our discussion groups differed in their understanding of the benefits of (dis)trust. The interviewees from the younger groups spoke more of the personal benefits covered in previous themes, while older participants emphasised the role of (dis)trust in making policies work, especially with regard to expertise.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. The meanings and sources of trust

Trust as a response to others' reliability

One of the most salient categories of trust understanding was perceiving trust as reliability, which is manifested through behaviour. In regard to personal trust, the notion of reliability included not letting someone down, keeping mutual secrets, consistency between thoughts and actions, and refraining from purposely hurting others. Accordingly, distrust was discussed as resulting from other's unreliability, observing others' immoral actions including only thinking about themselves, or disregarding personal boundaries.

The concept of reliability-based trust also referred to public institutions. Our interviewees revealed that their trust in institutions is mostly based on their knowledge, competencies and predictability. Thus, the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic by the political class in Poland was discussed by participants as leading to a near-unanimous dis-

appointment among them. Accordingly, the feeling of political distrust, which had already been strong among the participants before the pandemic, intensified even further. It was underlined that during the pandemic, people perceived the unfairness of particular policies and breaking the rules by public officials.

Trust as a time-consuming process

The aspect of time in building trust-based relationships was a salient theme in our discussions. Thus, trust was often considered as risk calculation – one has to see the opportunities and threats of trusting others, and make a calculated decision. The interviewees agreed that time is an essential factor in building trust - regular and long-term interactions with others help to overcome distrust. That is why they argued that they tend to trust relatives and long-term friends.

Trust as mutuality

The interviewees also highlighted reciprocity of trust as its definitive feature. They explained how their trusting attitude was based on the fact that others trusted them, too.

Trust as a well-informed decision

The interviewees suggested that caution and reason should be exercised when making decisions about trust. They stressed that blind trust, naivety or being too wholehearted towards others could pose significant emotional, cognitive and economic threats. They argued that we should trust ourselves to make well-informed choices about whom to trust in order to protect ourselves from harm. Participants discussed the cognitive, emotional, and economic risks of ill-placed trust and too much trust, emphasising the importance of being sceptical about various information sources in the age of misinformation and disinformation.

Trust as a means to meeting new people and having friends

Trust was also seen as indispensable or highly beneficial for strong relationships with people. Interviewees emphasised that trust is essential for individuals to have close colleagues, classmates or friends, and to live a good life. They pointed to emotional benefits of trusting others (reducing stress and anxiety, feelings of security, and emotional balance), the cognitive benefits (establishing relationships and learning about people and life), and the pragmatic benefits (receiving help and the ability to be a part of professional cooperation).

Trust as the lubricant that keeps the public sphere functioning

The participants also emphasised the important role of trust and distrust in successful pandemic policy-making. Trust was not only seen as a by-product of certain policies, but also as the important component that made them work. The interviewees believed that this kind of trust makes policymaking significantly simpler, and contributes to more confidence in some pandemic countermeasures, such as mask-wearing mandates.

4.2. Main differences between researched age groups

Many trust-building mechanisms and understandings of trust, as described by our interviewees, displayed a highly consistent pattern across all age groups.

Overall, the younger age groups (11-12, 13-14) in our research tended to focus more on the importance of confidentiality and reciprocity in building trust-based relationships. They also placed greater emphasis on family members and school friends as trustworthy individuals, and often relied on social media and content created by unknown individuals to obtain information. Moreover, when speaking of benefits from trust, they emphasised that trust is a means of establishing new relationships, and entering into new groups or societies. Additionally, all age groups shared a lack of trust in politics and authorities during the pandemic, but younger participants were more impacted by school closures and social isolation.

The older age groups (18-19, 30-40) tended to understand reliability in terms of shared experiences, and pointed to spouses and work colleagues as trustworthy individuals. They relied more on online media and television to obtain information, and placed greater importance on the economic and general drawbacks of not trusting the right people. Moreover, when describing benefits of trust, they emphasised the positive consequences of "having someone trustworthy", as if to underscore trust = friendship.

Two major issues can be pointed out when reflecting on the limitations of the presented study. First, availability sampling and the aforementioned issues regarding recruitment could equate to a certain bias in our sample's composition. Participants from impoverished backgrounds and people at risk of social exclusion might not have been included in our research. Given this group hypothetical experiences and understanding of trust that likely differs from people of higher socioeconomic status and social capital, this establishes a regrettable lacuna in our data. Second, in a fashion typical of focus-group interviews, our discussions sparked various points of views and unveiled shared experiences. Yet, more in-depth analysis would be needed to understand specific mechanisms of trust-building. For instance, one of our conclusions is a major difference between how people speak about (dis)trust in interpersonal relationships and their relations with public institutions. The extent to which these two spheres establish different modes of (dis)trust building calls for further qualitative studies.

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9. "Trust but Verify": Constructing Trust and Distrust during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Serbia

Jelena Ćeriman[16], Vujo Ilić, and Ana Đorđević[17]

1. The Covid-19 pandemic in Serbia

The first coronavirus case in Serbia was confirmed on March 6, 2020 (Reuters, 2020). By September 1, 2022, when the data collection was taking place, the official data produced by the Institute for Public Health confirmed 16,695 deaths since the outbreak's start, 2,286,511 confirmed cases, out of 10,689,969 tested individuals (official data from covid19.rs website). One fifth of the tested people were positive. The mortality ratio was less than one per hundred (0.7%). The population of Serbia, recorded by the official 2022 Census preliminary data, was 6,690,887, which means roughly a third of the population was infected from the beginning of the outbreak (SORS, 2022).

The pandemic developed in seven waves (WHO, 2022). The first two waves peaked in mid-April and mid-July 2020, with weekly averages of 370, and 395 confirmed cases each day. The subsequent two waves were much more severe than the first two waves. The third wave peaked in the first week of December 2020, with an average of 7,260 confirmed cases daily. The third wave slowly progressed into a fourth one, peaking in mid-March 2021, with an average of 4,980 daily confirmed cases. The fifth and sixth waves happened at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, and were the most severe regarding new cases. The fifth wave stretched from September through October 2021, averaging over 7,000 cases daily. The sixth wave had the fastest spread rate, peaking in late January 2022, with a weekly average of 16,650 confirmed cases daily. The last wave happened in late summer of 2022, peaking in the second week of August, with an average of 6,100 confirmed cases daily.

The mortality rates have changed over time (Table 1). During the first two waves, the mortality rates were the highest, but as there were not many cases due to high stringency, there were also fewer deaths. Many more people got infected during the third and fourth waves, and these two waves caused more deaths but at a lower mortality rate than the first two waves. The fifth wave, during which most people died, had a similar mortality rate as the third and fourth waves. The number of new deaths and mortality rates decreased only during the sixth and seventh waves, even though the number of new cases remained high.

The official numbers of Covid-19-related deaths were a topic of heated debate in Serbia. In June 2020, the Investigative Journalism Portal BIRN published its findings based on the official Covid-19 information system data, which showed that more than twice

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as many infected patients had died than the authorities announced (Jovanović, 2020). Later, this finding received additional support, as both official data and different independent models showed that Serbia had high levels of excess deaths over this period. The Economist's model ranked Serbia as the second country in the world, superseded only by Bulgaria, reporting 100,000 more deaths than the official figures released by the Serbian authorities (The Economist, 2022).

Table 1. Waves of the pandemic in Serbia, 2020-2022					
Wave	Start	Days	New cases	New deaths	Mortality (%)
1	Mar-20	163	12,175	252	2.1
2	Jun-20	102	20,824	491	2.4
3	Sep-20	139	376,842	3,396	0.9
4	Feb-21	170	311,134	2,969	1.0
5	Aug-21	163	614,019	5,759	0.9
6	Jan-22	169	690,583	3,253	0.5
7	Jun-22	188	419,902	1,393	0.3
Source: adapted from the WHO (2022)					

When the first cases were confirmed in Serbia, Covid-19 was initially disregarded by some political and health establishment members as an exaggeration. However, following the death rate spike in Italy, Serbia acted quickly to prevent the spread of the virus (Tanasijević, 2020). The government declared a national State of Emergency on March 15, 2020, and implemented a strict lockdown. The circulation of citizens was prohibited between 5 PM and 5 AM on weekdays, and entirely during the weekends. Citizens over 65 were banned from moving outdoors all together. Borders were closed, as well as most public areas and institutions, while grocery stores and pharmacies remained open. In the beginning, the schools switched to classes broadcast on public TV, but later they began with online classes (OECD, 2020). These measures were effective when implemented in their fullness, and led to a significant decrease in movement throughout Serbia (Graph 1). After the initial measures, a similar change was never recorded (Google, 2022).

Graph 1. 2020 mobility changes, compared to pre-coronavirus baseline

Graph 1. 2020 mobility changes, compared to pre-coronavirus baseline
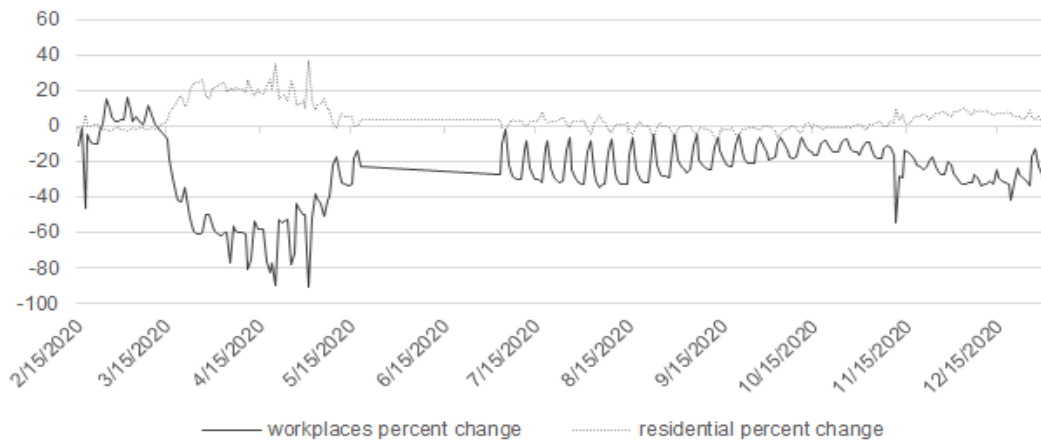
Source: adapted from Google Mobility Data (2022)

The outbreak in Serbia coincided with the beginning of the election campaign for scheduled parliamentary elections. The elections were due to take place on April 26. However, they were suspended due to the State of Emergency, and rescheduled for June 21. The government lifted the curfew on May 6. Many related this to the need to run an election campaign, which the opposition parties boycotted. The Stringency Index (Graph 2) can indicate the changes in the stringency of measures over time (Hale et al., 2021). While initially the measures were highly stringent, they were almost wholly reduced during the election campaign. When new weekend curfews were announced after Election Day, on July 7, this triggered mass protests, and the intended curfew measures were ultimately repealed.

Graph 2. Stringency Index for Serbia, 2020-2022
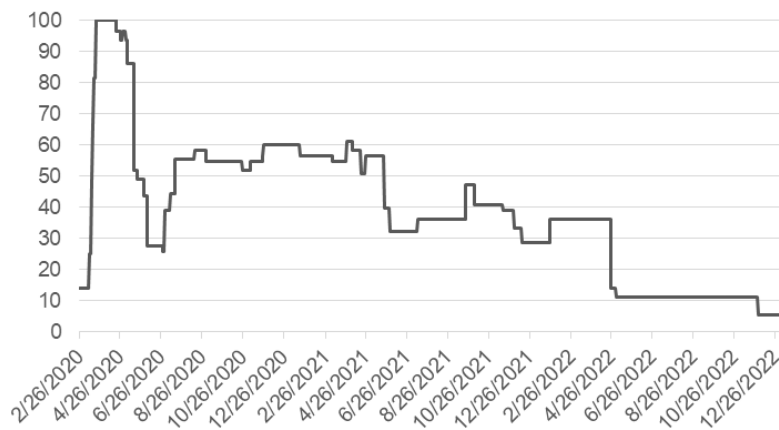
Source: adapted from Hale et al. (2021)

With the third wave, in late 2021, the government introduced a series of new measures that limited opening hours for specific businesses, and implemented online classes for school children. However, the perception was created that the stringency of the

measures followed political instead of public health reasons. Consequently, some regions were particularly hit by the pandemic, such as Novi Pazar, dubbed "Serbian Bergamo" (Nurković, 2021).

Due to its geopolitical orientation, the Serbian government was able to make deals with Russian, Chinese, and Western companies for more than 11 million doses of vaccines early on in 2021. The government ran a successful campaign for vaccination, and as a result of having enough supplies, Serbia was among the countries with the fastest vaccination rate in Europe (Higgins, 2021). After the initial fast vaccination rate, the vaccination efforts plateaued, with slightly more than 50% of the population getting at least one dose of the vaccine. In parallel, as the population was vaccinated, the government gradually reduced the stringency of the measures, almost entirely dropping them by the end of 2021. In 2022, Serbia organised a referendum for constitutional changes, held general elections, and organised a population census, initially planned for 2021, but rescheduled.

The public mood towards the measures changed over time. When the measures were the most stringent, the Ipsos March-April survey showed 92% of citizens trusted the state measures (Danas, 2020). Even though the public was discussing whether the measures were too stringent in the first phase, the population mostly thought they were adequate for the situation, while the minority thought they were too harsh. When the government loosened the measures after the elections, the majority thought they were too mild. Additionally, when the third wave came in the autumn, and the measures were not as stringent as in the spring, people were more worried and pessimistic (Valicon, 2020). Public trust in the doctors and scientists was consistently higher in different surveys than in the state representatives, such as the President, government, and the crisis Task Force (BCBP, 2020; Mihailović, 2020).

Distrust in official data and conspiracies about the virus and vaccines proliferated in 2020. A GlobSec survey from December showed 38 percent did not trust the official numbers of infected, 34 percent believed coronavirus was a "fake" disease, 26 percent that the coronavirus had been deliberately created, and 24 percent that the vaccines would be used to harm people deliberately (RTV, 2020).

When the vaccination started in early 2021, citizens that trusted the authorities mostly also trusted the vaccination process, and vice versa (Kosorić, 2020). Within a couple of months, an Ipsos survey from April-May showed that more than half of respondents (55%) said they were vaccinated, registered for vaccination, or were sure they would be vaccinated. A smaller number (only 7%) were confident they would not vaccinate. However, a significant number of citizens (31%) were unsure if they would get vaccinated. There was also a significant age difference, with 56% of young people believing that for them, the vaccine was equally risky, or riskier than getting infected (Žeželj et al., 2021). A Survey conducted by CeSID showed that citizens trusted Chinese and Russian vaccines more than those produced in the west (N1, 2021).

Public opinion surveys from 2022 show the limitations of the vaccination campaign, which plateaued in mid-2021. Several surveys showed that 57-58% of respondents said

they were vaccinated (Bjeloš & Hercigonja, 2022; Ilić et al., 2022). A survey done by Crta during the data collection showed that, in retrospect, citizens were divided in their assessment of how the Government of Serbia had managed the coronavirus pandemic, with 40% satisfied (and the same share dissatisfied). On the other hand, most citizens (50%) pointed out their satisfaction with how the healthcare system in Serbia coped with the pandemic (Ilić et al., 2022). Citizen dissatisfaction was primarily directed towards the crisis Task Force, the expert and advisory body of the Government of Serbia, which was deemed politicised and flippant (Bjeloš & Hercigonja, 2022).

The data collection happened during the virus's last (seventh) wave. On September 1, 2022, the Institute for Public Health recorded 12,747 tested in the previous 24 hours, of which 3,316 were infected in 24 hours (26%), and 11 patients died. At that moment, 650 were hospitalised, and 28 patients were on ventilators. Compared to the previous waves, at the time of data collection, the severity of the pandemic was already waning, and it ceased being at the centre of public debate. Other topics, such as Kosovo negotiations, energy security, the war in Ukraine, and LGBT rights, replaced it.

2. Procedure and participants

2.1 Procedure

Formal ethical approval that the study corresponds to the principles of good scientific research practice was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade on June 2, 2022. The application for ethical approval contained the following documents: focus group guide, sampling guidelines, socio-demographic questionnaire, informed consent form, invitation letter for the participants, and risk minimisation measures, and after detailed consideration, all members of the Ethics Committee voted in favour of the decision.

The WP5 researchers translated the documents, and a pre-test was implemented with one primary and one high school student confirming the clarity of questions and themes. When it came to the recruitment strategies, this process was outsourced to a research agency, "Masmi Belgrade," which specialises in market research and public opinion surveys; they carried out the recruitment of potential participants from their data base, taking into account the methodological setting of the research, i.e., the necessity of gender, age and geographical diversity of the respondents.

In addition, the following criteria were respected: that everyone has previous experience with the Zoom platform and good conditions for online participation (good internet connection, functional microphone and camera, and a space in which they have privacy), the absence of significant physical or mental conditions that would prevent participation in the focus group discussions, that they are Serbian native speakers, and that research participants do not know each other, or they know each other only superficially.

The organisers had sent all the contacted people an invitation letter containing information about the research's aim and subject, organisers, and conductors of the research, estimated duration of a focus group discussion, how the anonymity of research participants and data confidentiality are protected. They were also instructed on the possibility of ending participation in the focus group discussion and withdrawing consent to use collected data with no harm to any of those who found themselves in such a situation. Invitation letters were sent to all contacted adult participants and minors and their guardians - who submitted signed consent forms before the start of the focus groups.

All focus group discussions were conducted during July (4 focus groups) and September 2022 (4 focus groups). Four IFDT researchers conducted all focus groups via the Zoom platform. Two moderators were present during all focus groups, one of whom was the main moderator in charge of moderating the focus group discussion following the guidelines, and the other was a co-moderator who was in charge of monitoring the technical implementation of the discussion, asking questions only for further clarification of the main moderator's questions or offering additional instruction (which rarely happened). The most extended duration of the focus group was an hour and 20 minutes (01:20:06); the shortest was 52 minutes (52:38); the average duration was an hour and 6 minutes (01:06). There were no unexpected events or problems during the research process.

2.2 Participants

In total, 48 participants took part in 8 focus groups: 24 men and 24 women. The socio-demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Socio-demographic structure of participants

N	Age	Gender	School track or highest education	Education mother	Education father	Place of living
Focus group 11-12 A (n = 6)						
1	12	Female	Public Elementary school	University or college	University or college	A big city
2	12	Female	Public Elementary school	University or college	High school	A big city
3	11	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	A big city
4	11	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	A big city
5	12	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	University or college	A big city
6	11	Female	Public Elementary school	University or college	High school	A big city
Focus group 11-12 B (n = 6)						
1	11	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	The suburbs
2	12	Female	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	The suburbs
3	11	Female	Public Elementary school	High school	University or college	A big city
4	11	Female	Public Elementary school	-	-	A big city
5	12	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	A town or a small city
6	12	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	University or college	A big city
Focus group 14-15 A (n = 6)						
1	15	Female	Experimental/private elementary school	University or college	High school	A big city
2	15	Female	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	A big city

3	15	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	A big city
4	15	Male	Public Elementary school	University or college	University or college	A big city
5	15	Female	Public Elementary school	High school	University or college	A big city
6	15	Male	Public Elementary school	High school	High school	A big city
Focus group 14-15 B (n = 6)						
1	15	Male	Public elementary school	University or college	High school	A big city
2	14	Male	Experimental/private elementary school	University or college	High school	A big city
3	14	Male	Public elementary school	University or college	University or college	A big city
4	14	Female	Public elementary school	High school	High school	A town or a small city
5	14	Male	Public elementary school	University or college	University or college	A big city
6	14	Female	Public elementary school	University or college	High school	A big city
Focus group 18-19 A (n = 6)						
1	18	Female	Vocational high school	University or college	University or college	A big city
2	19	Male	Vocational high school	University or college	University or college	A big city
3	19	Female	Vocational high school	University or college	University or college	A big city
4	18	Female	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
5	19	Male	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
6	19	Male	Vocational high school	High school	High school	A big city
Focus group 18-19 B (n = 6)						
1	19	Male	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
2	19	Female	Vocational high school	High school	University or college	A big city

3	18	Female	Vocational high school	High school	High school	A big city
4	19	Male	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
5	19	Female	Grammar school	University or college	University or college	A big city
6	18	Male	Vocational high school	University or college	University or college	A big city
Focus group 30+ A (n = 6)						
1	45	Male	High school	N/A	N/A	A big city
2	44	Male	High school	N/A	N/A	A big city
3	44	Female	University or college	N/A	N/A	A big city
4	31	Female	University or college	N/A	N/A	A big city
5	30	Male	High school	N/A	N/A	A big city
6	34	Female	University or college	N/A	N/A	A big city
Focus group 30+ B (n = 6)						
1	30	Male	University or college	N/A	N/A	A big city
2	37	Male	High school	N/A	N/A	A big city
3	43	Female	University or college	N/A	N/A	Suburbs of a big city
4	46	Female	High school	N/A	N/A	A big city
5	44	Female	High school	N/A	N/A	A big city
6	37	Male	University, graduate degree	N/A	N/A	A big city

2.3 Data analysis

Four IFDT researchers were involved in coding (each coded two transcripts). One IFDT researcher monitored the first phase of the coding process, discussing the codes with other researchers. The main aim of this phase was to fulfill the task that all coded parts of the text give data relevant to the proposed research questions. In the second coding phase, one IFDT researcher independently conducted the thematic coding, based on which the following analysis was performed.

3. Results from the thematic analysis

3.1. General trust necessary, but distrust pervades

Within this theme, participants from our focus group discussions talked about perceiving **trust as a necessary part of living in a society and community.** One participant points out that people are social beings, and that a certain amount of **trust** in others **is necessary and good** for communal life. Participants also say that trust is necessary for normal functioning, and even that trust is "*the purpose of having institutions*" (RS 18-19 B), as well as that institutional trust is necessary:

> *If I go to the store and see the expiration date of milk, I have to trust that the information is credible, but if I go five times in a row and find spoiled milk, then I won't trust it anymore and won't buy milk there*" (RS 18-19 A).

Respondents believe that without trust, there is nothing; if they cannot lean on somebody and something, then there is no normal functioning. However, some believe that a certain amount of distrust is necessary when forming relations with others: "Trust but verify" (RS 30-50 A), one participant says.

They also believe that **trust in people is good, but should be conditional.** For example, one participant thinks trust is good, but wonders, "in what sense is it good to have trust?" (RS 11-12 A). He concludes that we should not "believe in some things that do not exist or are made up" (RS 11-12 A).

They all agree that general trust is necessary since we live in a community, but trust in people cannot be unconditional, except if we speak about trust in the family because participants say that their families are always there for them.

Most respondents agree that **distrust is bad,** and that it indicates problems in society. However, according to their conceptions, they mostly distrusted the authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a symptom of non-normal functioning. They talk about distrust in institutions, as well as distrust in the state based on bad experiences with these actors, for example, when the state/authorities failed to fulfill different tasks to protect the lives of their citizens.

This theme is found among all age groups. Younger people mostly talk about interpersonal trust, and older people talk about general and institutional trust and interpersonal trust. The pervasive sentiment among participants is general distrust, but their interventions during focus groups emphasise the importance of trust.

Participants from our sample talk about the foundations and sources of trust and distrust rather than about their very definition, which will be further analysed in the following sections.

3.2 Confidentiality and integrity

Within this topic, participants reflect on how they understand trust, primarily in inter-personal relations. They understand trust as confidentiality, reliability, and the possibility of leaning on someone, but that also includes the other person's integrity, strong character, and principles. Practical examples include keeping secrets, promises, and acting consistently. When the opposite happens, such as revealing one's secret, there is distrust and hurt in interpersonal relations.

The possibility to trust, for our participants, **is based on previous** good **experiences with other people** - people they can rely on because they keep their secrets. For them, **interpersonal trust is based on confidentiality and keeping promises**: "*I can tell her my deepest secret, and she will not tell anyone*" (RS 11-12 B).

Keeping a secret is an essential aspect of interpersonal trust for the participants in the youngest age group. For example, one participant believes a person because he proved several times that he could keep a secret: "*We tested each other, and by that, we know that we can trust each other*" (RS 11-12 A). This participant also had a negative experience with a friend who betrayed a secret, which was not a pleasant experience because everyone made fun of him because of it, and he thought "*he should have been a little more careful*" (RS 11-12 A). Another participant in the same age group also had a friend who did not keep a secret; however, she is still his friend, although she does "*not trust him anymore; he really lost my trust*" (RS 11-12 A).

Most of our participants also think that **trust is based on integrity**, "*having a strong character*" (RS 18-19 B), and "*doing what you promise you will do*" (RS 18-19 B). Most of our research participants say that **interpersonal trust is based on the absence of betrayal.** For example, one participant trusts a person who never betrayed him (RS 30-50 A), and another in the same age group trusts a person who did not disappoint her (RS 30-50 A):

For some participants, **interpersonal trust is based on honesty and openness**. For example, one participant says she trusts people who are open about their standpoint on things (RS 30-50 A). Another participant distrusts people who: *are not consistent with their own stories, who change their opinion (...) who are contradictory and do not have respect for themselves. (...) How should I trust you if you are not true to yourself?* (RS 18-19 A).

Hence, **distrust is based on bad experiences with others** – situations when a person cannot rely on others. For example, most of our participants say that if somebody in the past told others their secrets, or did not support them when they needed it, that would be the reason to become distrustful of other people in general because such bad experiences could happen again. Some of them distrust people if something previously agreed on is not respected, or if a person leaves others stranded. Therefore, according to the opinion of all our participants, **interpersonal distrust is developed due to the personal inconsistency of others**. They also say that **interpersonal distrust is based on betrayal**. For example, one participant says that he distrusts a person who "*always backstabs others*" (RS 11-12 A), while another says that she lost trust in her

friends "*because almost everyone has betrayed her*" (RS 11-12 A). Another participant from the same age group says he lost trust in a friend who stole his phone on a day trip, and did not say anything about it later (RS 11-12 A). Therefore, for these participants, **distrust is a sort of protection against betrayal and exclusion.** One research participant says, for example, that it is good to have a dose of distrust towards others because that is how we protect ourselves from those who might misuse the information we give them (RS 14-15 B).

Regarding the representation of this theme in the narratives of our research participants, it is found among all age groups in a relatively similar manner, mostly around discussion on interpersonal relations. For the youngest, concretely, it is all about keeping secrets. At 14-15, there is the aspect of learning who to trust and who not to, but based on confidentiality and integrity. Also, it is less frequent among youngsters 18-19 years old than in other age groups.

3.3 Family and care as the basis for trust

This theme reflects all those answers when participants name specific people who are significant in their lives (significant others) as trustful and reliable, and as sources of trust. Relations with those people, such as parents, trainers, teachers, and friends, who are there for them, whom they have known for a long time, and who never let them down, are usually based on closeness and care. This is trust based on emotional involvement, love, caring, similarity, proximity, and reciprocity. Furthermore, unconditional love and support are crucial elements of family **trust**. One participant points out that he trusts his family, his mother, as people who unconditionally wish him the best (RS 14-15 B).

Participants recognise this type of trust as different from the one based on the perceived competencies and expertise of the other person, which is a relevant distinction. Trust based on competence is necessary for trust in institutions and social authorities, and one based on emotionality is essential for family and friends' relations, according to our research participants, and these two types of trust are independent of each other. Hence, the participants experience distrust when there is betrayal or unreliability in another person.

Most of our participants define **trust as closeness and as something based on similar life experiences**. Although they say that sometimes trust can be constructed without having a close connection with a specific person, they also think it could be based on the feeling of closeness that (later) it could be discovered to be a similar life experience. For example, one participant trusts a friend "*who does not like games so much, but likes to fantasise, and he is the same type of personality*" (RS 11-12 A). Another one from the same age group also trusts his friend because they do not like games much, but they like to go to each other's houses and play football (RS 11-12 A).

Interpersonal trust for all our participants **is based on mutual love, care, and security**. For example, one research participant trusts her aunt because of her love and what

she has done for her (RS 11-12 A). She also trusts the person who has always been her right hand, always there for her (RS 11-12 A). Similarly, another trusts "*the person closest to her heart*" (RS 11-12 A). Also, other participants say that they trust the person that helped them when they were hurt and sad (RS 11-12 A); additionally, they "*trust their family because they love them*" (RS 11-12 A). One participant from the older age group also says that she trusts a person that provides her with a sense of security, among other things (RS 30-50 A). **Reciprocity** in interpersonal relations is about "*how other people treat me, I treat them; being there for each other*" (RS 18-19 B). So, for most of our participants, **trust is based on mutual help and emotional involvement**.

One participant makes an important observation that trust in interpersonal relations is based on emotional involvement and closeness (RS 18-19 A), again "*being there for each other*" (RS 18-19 B), which, however, does not exclude trust based on that person's knowledge on various topics. However, two other research participants, teenagers, think that there are two kinds of trust: one based on "expertise" and the other on "emotions," which in personal relations do not interfere with each other (RS 18-19 A). Furthermore, one participant speaks only about the emotional dimension of trust, and mentions his mother as a trustworthy person based on her "*wishing him the best and loving him*," even though "*she is mostly uninformed about current events*" (RS 18-19 A).

Interpersonal trust for most of our participants is **based on the history of caring and helping**: *If you have someone who helped you multiple times, gave some good advice, has never let you down (...) you know why you trust them* (RS 18-19 A).

This kind of trust was seen exclusively in interpersonal relations; none of our participants debated or applied this standpoint to institutional trust. All our participants think that **interpersonal trust is based on knowing someone well.** One participant trusted someone because "*he knew him all his life*" (RS 11-12 A). Another can also trust those "*she has known for a long time*" (RS 11-12 A). However, this participant also noticed that she lost trust in someone for not keeping secrets and thought she could "*just trust him because they have known each other for a long time*" (RS 11-12 A). For example, a participant from the older age group trusts a person who is a long-term acquaintance (RS 30-50 A). Trust is developed over a long time, and through deeds, according to all our participants because "*deeds are what matter*" (RS 18-19 B).

In a similar vein, all our participants define **interpersonal distrust as when they cannot rely on somebody:** *You don't trust someone when you can't rely on them, etc., to ask them for a favour* (RS 18-19 A).

Also, one participant, from the age group 30-50 years, says that for him, **interpersonal trust is often lost because of money** and that involvement of money in interpersonal relations destroys trust. Another participant also notices a similar thing: *If you trusted someone, let's say a friend, an example, he needs some money, you lend him some, and then he cools you off when he should have paid you back the same amount* (RS 18-19 B).

This theme is found among all age groups, with little or no difference among them. However, this theme seems more relevant for 11-12- and 18–19-year-olds than for the other two age groups.

3.4 Knowledge, information, competence

This theme regards accurate information, expert knowledge, and competence as strong sources of trust. It is mainly based on reasoning, unlike participants' narratives in the theme "Family and care as bases of trust", where trust is based mainly on emotional involvement. For all our participants, false information, doubts in competence, disinformation of citizens, and manipulation create distrust. Furthermore, if significant others (such as parents, trainers, or teachers) are doctors or health workers, or if they know a prominent doctor, they are considered trustworthy sources for them. Even though it is evolving in the interpersonal relations with the significant other who has authority over the participants, they agree that this is a different kind of source of trust. These sources of trust are significant for understanding the evolution of trust in institutions and authorities in the Serbian context.

There are several sources of trust, according to our research participants:

- **Family members as the trustful source of information:**

Since this participant's stepfather is an authority to him, he trusts his opinion regarding attitudes towards measures during the pandemic:

> However, once, it was a long time ago, I talked to my stepfather about it, and he said one very, very smart thing - the question is how many people passed away from the coronavirus, how many of these people do we know personally, etc. (RS 18-19 A).

- **Trust because a family member is a health worker:**

A participant's father is a health worker, and she trusted in the severity of the coronavirus (RS 18-19 A). During focus group discussions, she named the variegated opinions and inappropriately implemented measures they were entirely obliged to respect at one point and abolish at another. This is why she trusted her father as an expert and complied with the measures, as did some other people she knew.

- **Interpersonal trust is also based on the competence of people outside the family circle:**

One participant says that he trusts a knowledgeable person (RS 30-50 A), and another trusts a person who always gives the right advice and never lets him down (RS 30-50 A).

Here, **trust is based on perceived expertise**. For example, one participant says that his trust in authorities and trust, in general, is based on his perception of a person as competent and expert for a particular subject, and not on his personal "*emotional relationship*" with someone; his liking is irrelevant here, he says (RS 18-19 A).

- **Trust is also based on expert knowledge** for some of the participants:

For example, one participant trusts measures based on knowledge and information about their effects since he is from the medical profession and understands how to fight against respiratory infections (RS 30-50 B).

- **Interpersonal trust is based on the history of knowledge:**

Similarly, with the history of caring and helping, there is this other kind of trust based on the history of having good, reliable information and "*smart things (that someone) advises you to do*" (RS 18-19 A).

When it comes to trust in institutions, **transparency** comes **as a basis of trust** for several of our participants. For example, one participant from the older age group says that in a political sense, he would only have trust in a leader who would transparently present our country's problems to all citizens (RS 30-50 B).

Participants also notice that **more information** for them means **less anxiety.** Only one participant pointed out that the news about the number of dead people, which was dominant during the pandemic, caused her anxiety. One participant elaborates during the discussion that having more information on the virus means decision-making and peace with his acts (RS 18-19 A). However, this participant also emphasises that not all information was verified during the pandemic. Precisely, unreliable, false information and disinformation through the mass media and the internet, according to our participants, are connected to the development of distrust. For our participants, if there are inconsistencies in the information the task force brings to the public, they cannot be trusted.

When our participants notice the unprofessionalism of health workers, the spread of unreliable, false information, and the misuse of the data, they express distrust in health institutions. For example, some think that **non-experts should not have spread disinformation**. One participant thinks that such practice resulted in a loss of trust in the population, and fuelled disrespect of the measures (RS 18-19 A).

Such a situation is connected to participants' **questioning of the reliability of the information** and the development of **distrust in the health care system.** Several participants did not trust the expertise of health workers due to unclear and contradictory information. Another participant also recalls the situation when data was leaked in the media, showing that official numbers of infected and deceased from suspected or confirmed Coronavirus, were incorrect. Therefore, they believe that most people perceived official numbers as deceptive (RS 18-19 A). That also caused **distrust in the professionalism and knowledge of doctors** and, consequently, **distrust in the creators of**

measures due to their misuse of data. For example, another research participant believes that the data on the number of deceased and sick people were exaggerated, and therefore he had no confidence in those who designed the measures (RS 18-19 B).

Therefore, some of our participants **distrust institutions because of the lack of relation between measures and their effects.** From the perspective of a few participants, **measures were inadequate,** and that caused their distrust. For example, one participant says:

> *I honestly didn't believe that ... it could help us because every day, more and more people got Corona and died, and that is why I didn't believe that I could do anything (with all those measures)* (RS 11-12 B).

Most of our participants distrusted the **health system because of** their perceived **incompetency**. The number of deaths rose for them because doctors and the health system did not take adequate care of people with other health problems, due to their focus on Covid patients.

Several participants also spoke about **distrust due to perceived self-knowledge**. For example, one participant says that the Coronavirus story is:

> *[Overblown] and unreal. It can only pass with lay people. (...) It is impossible that every time there is a new strain, somebody always brings some new strain. Simply, it is unreal. Despite all those measures, someone always brings some new strain of the virus* (RS 18-19 A).

Another one says:

> *On the other hand, I believe that even just wearing a mask or gloves, or whatever, at some point in time, leads to the fact that we become so sensitive to the virus itself that we do perhaps even worsen our immunity than, for example, not wearing it, or rather we didn't create resistance to the virus itself, that's my opinion; experts should know that we have to create immunity at the beginning and not at the end of the virus* (RS 18-19 B).

Another participant was also suspicious of the physicians in her hometown because there were all sorts of sick people on one ward in hospital, which for her did not make sense (RS 18-19 B). However, she does not consider the broader picture of the overload of the health system in Serbia, and thinks that such a situation was in place because of the poor organisation of medical staff, and not the situation per se.

When it comes to participants' narratives regarding this theme, it appears among all age groups, and shows how it is vital for each of them to rely on expert knowledge, but also on how the pandemic revealed weaknesses in the system, causing distrust. For some of them, a number of measures were inadequate or even nonsensical. This theme relates to the study's next theme section across all age groups: "Autonomy, critical thinking, and similar values," within which participants speak about relying on their reasoning in the evaluation of information and the competencies of social authorities.

3.5 Autonomy, critical thinking, and similar values

This theme reflects participants' emphasis on individual autonomy, critical thinking, the ability to check and understand relevant information, and similar values (being objective, not having a black-and-white worldview) as trust sources. According to their responses, the participants are their most important source, with their ability to rationally process information and decide autonomously for themselves. For them, **self-trust is a basis for general trust**.

Most participants also see it as their right to decide how to act in certain situations, and they emphasise **the importance of the individual decision**. They trust other people who agree with this attitude, and distrust people who are ignorant, not critical enough, and who trust blindly. Sometimes, decision-making was based solely on common sense and nothing more. For our participants, such "reasonable distrust" (RS 18-19 B) is important for understanding the institutional distrust and distrust in authorities, especially during the pandemic when information is contradictory, sometimes even false, and the expert opinions discordant, as the participants themselves noticed.

Few participants insist on reasonable distrust and suspicion as a way of rational thinking and questioning in situation where people (who are generally prone to mistakes) decide. Further, reasonable distrust for most participants is based on common sense, their rational logic, which they perceive everyone could understand. For the rest, it is based on self-informing.

Most participants say that trust is good, but we must also be **critical because authorities lie**, which is at the same time their reflection on the integrity of authorities. Generally, they say, it is good to trust the authorities, but they sometimes lie to citizens. Therefore, participants do not need to trust them.

In addition, **participants' attitude towards measures is based on multiple sources of information.** Some participants pointed out that by checking several sources of information, they could form their opinion about decision-makers and the measures in Serbia. For them, **trust is based on self-informing and autonomy.** For example, one participant considers trust as something based on personal interest and information seeking, as well as getting necessary data, as opposed to her and others' perceived distrust (RS 18-19 B). Another one from the same age group also mentions that she is the sole source of her own opinion, not others (RS 18-19 B). Their trust is not based on ignorance, but on the "perceived knowledge," similar to that described in the theme "Knowledge, information, competence."

For them, a **critical attitude towards information represents a criterion of trust**. For example, one participant states that a dose of criticism towards information is necessary to form one's attitude and the relation of trust/distrust towards others (RS 14-15 B).

Trust is based on shared values and a critical attitude towards information. One participant points out that she had trust in her friend based on shared values, but that

trust disappeared when she noticed that her friend did not have a critical attitude towards information during the pandemic (RS 14-15 B). For her, **interpersonal trust is based on similar values, thinking, and mutual understanding.** For example, another participant considers trust to be related not to emotions, but to shared values:

> *The way they think, their arguments, the power of critical thinking, how they understand the opinions of other parties, and not consider them black-and-white. Those are the people I will have trust in and ask for opinions, even though we are not close* (RS 18-19 A).

This is different from the perspective of other participants quoted earlier in this report, who trust in people they are emotionally close to, while the quoted narrative above speaks about trust based on rational reasons. For the participant quoted above, trust has less to do with emotional status than a person's way of thinking.

Regarding self-informing and critical thinking, a few participants emphasise **the importance of the individual decision.** One participant, for example, emphasises the importance of citizens' freedoms, that everyone can decide whether to comply with any of the prescribed measures, such as the vaccination, or not (RS 14-15 B).

Moreover, (**dis)trust in information** our participants talk about within this theme **is based on a critical review of data**. For example, one participant states that she approached all information critically during the pandemic, and that this helped her see data misuse (RS 14-15 B). Although this may sound the same as the "self-perceived knowledge" mentioned above, the focus here is on the participant's ability to critically review information.

For some, **interpersonal distrust forms a balance contrary to uncritical general trust**. For example, one research participant thinks that people who trust everyone, and have no opinion, are also not to be trusted (RS 18-19 A). For her, integrity and critical thinking are the essential elements in trust building. Also, distrust is a form of self-critique for a few other participants. For example, one participant pointed out that it is okay "*to have some dose of distrust to test ourselves*" (RS 18-19 A).

When it comes to age differences, this theme is found among all age groups, but it is relevant mainly for the 18-19 years old, probably because they are at that age/stage when attaining autonomy and independence is the developmental task.

3.6 Consistency

This theme reflects the importance of consistency, frequency of accurate information, non-contradictions, agreements among the experts, and such, as significant sources of trust, primarily institutional. Everything opposite to that is a source of distrust - which was very much the case in our sample. People distrusted the authorities during the pandemic due to contradictory, changing information, and discordance among the experts.

Participants express their **distrust because of inconsistent measures and information.** For example, one participant says that there were some measures that she did not even understand:

> *Why, for example, were we not allowed to go out after 5 PM... The virus also existed before 5 PM, so that seemed pointless to me, and nobody explained it. I also agree; I don't know which girl said it, but I agree. I think one mask can't protect you now; I don't even know how much it will protect you, especially since I have to wear that one mask all day; it makes no sense* (RS 14-15 A).

For most of our research participants, **consistency is a basis of (dis)trust in government.** For example, one participant points out that citizens were forced to comply with the measures. However, simultaneously, governmental leaders participated in several mass events without respecting the measures, and that caused her to distrust the government (RS 30-50 B). Next to this, the **task force in Serbia was disunited in providing information.** For example, one participant says that the problem with the task force was not that they were disagreeing, because that is expected when making decisions, but that they did not vote on one single option they would bring to the public, and so they promoted mutually conflicting information to the citizens (RS 18-19 A).

Most participants express their distrust due to contradictory information. In their opinion, too much-variegated information creates confusion, which is why some people distrust authorities, and do not comply with the measures.

Contradictory, unclear, and illogical information is also solid ground for distrust in institutions and authorities. However, none of the participants took into consideration the extremely uncertain and ever-changing scenarios faced by the institutions, so, they did not give those institutions any 'mitigating circumstances' for any inconsistent behavior. One participant says that the task force in Serbia was made up of "*interesting people*", and that some of them were "*problematic*," coming up with "*some information which was counterintuitive, but I would say contradictory, as well*" (RS 18-19 A).

For most of them, trust is based on the frequency of correct information. A previously quoted participant considered the false information spreading around that the Coronavirus will be gone once the summer comes because high temperatures will kill it. However, that did not happen, and *"its soft spot became its strongest weapon"* (RS 18-19 A) because measures were loosened, and the Coronavirus spread again during the summer. Therefore, he deduces that trust is based on the frequency of correct information, and not on such serious mistakes as those he mentioned.

To summarise participants' answers, not having information is a good ground for trust because one must rely on the experts and people in power when one does not know what to do. Then, more information from different sources gives a person solid knowledge and more autonomy, and peace in deciding what to do in a specific situation. However, too much contradictory information creates confusion and a lack of trust in institutions and authorities.

This theme is found among all age groups. The younger participants realised that the mandates of the social authorities and the measures were changing constantly. The older participants believed these changes and inconsistencies were a consequence of corrupt experts in the decision-making task force, which resulted in distrust in the authorities during the pandemic.

3.7 Temporality and process

This theme reflects the general idea that trust builds over time, over hardship (when times are hard, you can know whom to trust), and that it is hard to gain, yet easily lost. Also, it reflects participants' ideas about the way trust changes over time. One participant said: "*Trust is gained by the stairs and distrust by the elevator*" (RS 18-19 A). Some people think that trust lessens over time, and with age, while others think that people get more sophisticated with age and in knowing whom to trust.

Most of our participants also express a **change of trust in measures over time**. They again express the importance of personal responsibility, and the importance of the process of evaluation of given measures. A few participants chose to trust one person-authority, i.e., to have personalised trust, and they describe this process as a connection of trusting someone who is an authority, for example, a mother or a trainer or someone else who they have always trusted, who in turn trust certain social authorities so that they will trust them too. This explanation is important for understanding how interpersonal trust can transfer to trust in institutions.

Some participants related public trust and compliance with the measures during the pandemic. This was a minor subtheme within the central theme, "Temporality and process," created mainly from the responses of the youngest respondents who were more trustful than the oldest groups of participants. The oldest (30+) are very distrustful, except those with expertise in the medical sciences who, they say, understand how to fight respiratory diseases. Also, it is noticeable from their narratives that the 11- 12-year age group is too young for these kinds of reflections on trust.

3.8 Doubts and conspiracies

This theme informs relevant sources of distrust during the pandemic, giving content to conspiracy theories and the like, which circulated during this time. Some respondents who express doubts express them regarding the background or effects, and not about the Coronavirus itself. Some participants thought that the Coronavirus was overblown, that it was not as severe as stated, and some considered everything a lie, that even the virus itself was made up. There is a sub-topic regarding doubts based on the involvement of politics. Participants from almost all age groups expressed beliefs that information was manipulated, and adjusted to the political needs of the ruling party.

Several participants think that **measures during the pandemic were pointless,** and should not have been introduced, but people should have created herd immunity as

protection against the Coronavirus. Some even think that the Coronavirus does not exist, and that the idea was to instill fear among citizens. Another participant is certain that, on a global level, as well as in Serbia, the Corona crisis was part of the manipulation of people to incite fear (for Serbia, she thinks that it was the President who instilled fear as his ruling technique) (RS 18-19 B).

A few participants think that the media overblew the Corona crisis. For example, one participant thinks that everything around the Coronavirus was overblown:

> *Overblown by media, really glorified, and targeted to one group of people, and those are the retired because they get scared the most and then went and spread misinformation around* (RS 18-19 A).

Distrust in government arises with the understanding that the measures are based on material gain, as in the case of one participant from the older age group. She believes that the construction of Covid hospitals was motivated exclusively by material interests.

Connected with this, several participants **expressed distrust due to doubting the background of the Corona crisis**. For example, one research participant expressed distrust due to doubting the background ("*financial benefit*") of the pandemic. Several participants, however, **doubted the background but trusted the virus.** Another participant from the same age group expresses that he has "*reservations*" regarding the background and the origin of the Coronavirus; however, he had personal experience with it, and he trusts in the very existence and severity of the virus (RS 18-19 A). This is quite different from the notion of another participant from the same group, speaking of general suspicion and not considering the severity of the illnesses caused by the Coronavirus (RS 18-19 A).

At the end of this spectrum, a few participants are distrustful, but still comply with **the authorities.** At some point, another participant from this group noticed that information started to appear contradictory. Information "*was adjusted to some events*," which caused their doubts and distrust (RS 18-19 A). However, they complied with the measures because the people in charge came up with them, regardless of whether they liked the proposed measures.

Several participants among the oldest age group expressed views that may be defined as conspiracy thinking. For example, some of them saw a connection between homosexuality and the Coronavirus through the work of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Concretely, one participant believes that the WHO created the Coronavirus and removed homosexuality from the list of diseases to actively influence the reduction of the world population (RS 30-50 B). Another participant supports such a view by saying that **political interest interfered with public interest** during the pandemic:

> *I do not trust in politicians; I think that they work exclusively in personal interest, that they actually make all decisions inspired by the fact that they make a personal profit, to stay in power as long as possible, to say what others expect, to say what others want to hear, and that is the secret of their prolonged rule and*

the fact that they are in power for such a long time. Otherwise, we would have changed them every three months (RS 30-50 B).

However, participants did not talk about their considerations of science and public interest. Some of our participants related distrust to the President of Serbia having a major role in creating and realising the measures. This theme is present in the narratives of all age groups, but it is mainly represented in the discussions among the oldest, 30+ people. They elaborated on their ideas and prejudices about the Coronavirus, and its measures. The most common source of doubt for them is the political manipulation of measures and the involvement of the political interest among the task force in Serbia.

3.9 Residual themes

Several other potential themes and important chunks of codes are not represented in the final set of themes. These codes are different from the viewpoint of other participants, presented in the previous sections of this report because, for example, three participants from our sample think that trust in people can be at the same time **good and bad.** For example, one participant thinks that: *It is good not to trust people because they could fool you, and it is good to trust some people because they will help you* (RS 11-12 A).

Another one from the same group also thinks trusting people can "*sometimes be, let us say, good and bad*" (RS 11-12 A), as well as another one who thinks trusting people "*sometimes [it] is good, sometimes it is not*" (RS 11-12 A).

They think that **some people can be trusted, and some cannot.** For example, one participant from the same group points out that we should see how "*it is important to trust certain people*", and that "*it is good to trust certain people*" (RS 11-12 A).

A few participants identified bad consequences of the pandemic, such as **alienation during the pandemic** (one research participant states that she rarely saw her friends during the pandemic due to the measures, and that this led to alienation between them (RS 14-15 B), or that the **Corona crisis has exposed insecurities and poor mental health**, especially among young people, according to the participants' opinions. For example, one participant from the same group points out that the pandemic exposed the psychological insecurities of young people because she noticed among her peers that some of them, who had a negative attitude towards their appearance, used masks to hide their faces (RS 14-15 B).

However, several participants say that **the pandemic did not significantly affect their everyday life** (primarily young people from our sample). For example, one participant says that he trusted his friends, so they did not respect the measures when seeing each other (they did not wear masks); so, the pandemic did not affect his everyday life too much (RS 14-15 B). There are also a few participants that even identify the **good sides of the pandemic.** For example, one participant from the older group believes that the

good sides of the Covid situation are remote work (work from home), which has increased productivity in some working spheres, and has enabled mothers to spend more time with their children, especially if they are sick, without their salary being reduced due to being absent from the workplace (RS 30-50 B).

The last identified code that is not included in the main list of themes or connected codes is a saying of one teenage participant: "*If I must, I won't*" (RS 18-19 B), and it represents a way of considering the restrictions which were too rigid, and faced a backlash from the young.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1 Meanings and sources of trust

All the participants from the focus group discussions conducted in Serbia think trust is necessary to live in a society and a community. Trust is necessary for normal functioning, and trust is even "the purpose of having institutions" (RS 18-19 B). However, some of our research participants believe that a certain amount of distrust is also necessary when forming relations with others. The general attitude prevailing among them is that trust in people is good, but should be conditional. They all agree that general trust is necessary since we live in a community, but trust in people cannot be unconditional, except if we speak about trust in the family. Relations with members of the family and close friends are based on closeness and care, according to them. That is trust based on emotional involvement, love, caring, similarity among people based on values and principles they support, proximity, and reciprocity.

Participants recognise this type of trust to be different from the one based on the perceived competence of the other person, which is a relevant distinction because trust based on competence is necessary for trust in institutions and social authorities, and the one based on emotionality is important for family and friends' relations. Based on the research data, these two types of trust are independent of each other.

Our participants define trust in interpersonal relations as confidentiality, reliability, and the possibility to lean on someone, including the other person's integrity, strong character, and principles. Most of our participants define trust as closeness, and as something based on similar life experiences. Although they say that sometimes trust could be constructed without having an intimate connection with a specific person, they also think it could be based on a feeling of closeness that (later) could be discovered to be a similar life experience. For most of our participants, trust in others (interpersonal relations) is based on credibility, confidentiality, integrity, honesty, reciprocity, and openness.

Conversely, they define distrust as situations when they cannot afford to rely on others. According to all our participants, interpersonal distrust develops from the personal inconsistency of others. When that happens, for example, if someone reveals their

deepest secrets, there is distrust and hurt. Therefore, for some of our participants, distrust is a sort of protection against betrayal and exclusion.

Most participants agree that distrust is negative and indicates problems in society. However, according to their conceptions, they mostly distrusted the authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is a symptom of non-normal functioning. They mostly speak about the foundation of trust in institutions, rather than the definition of such trust. According to our participants, the frequency of accurate information, non-contradictions, consistency, and transparency is the basis for trust in institutions. Unreliable, false information and disinformation of citizens in crisis times are connected to the development of distrust in institutions. Participants believe that people distrusted the authorities during the pandemic due to contradictory, changing information, and discordance among the medical and health experts and governmental authorities. However, participants did not talk directly about their considerations of science and public interest. Some of our participants related distrust to the President of Serbia, and the major role he played in creating and realising the measures.

Most participants trust others who agree with this attitude, and distrust people who are ignorant and not critical enough, and who blindly trusted information from institutions during the pandemic. Sometimes, their critical approach to information can simply be their common sense, and nothing more. This "reasonable distrust" (RS 18-19 B) is essential for understanding institutional distrust, especially during the pandemic when information is contradictory, sometimes even false, and the expert opinions discordant, as the participants themselves noticed.

A few participants chose to trust one person-authority, to have personalised trust, and they describe this process as the connection of trusting someone who is an authority to them, for example, a mother or a trainer, and relying on their trust in social authorities. This explanation is important for understanding the transfer of interpersonal to institutional trust.

4.2 Trust from the developmental perspective

All main themes presented here are found in the narratives of the participants in all age groups to a relatively similar degree, mostly around trust in interpersonal relations. Younger participants mostly talked about interpersonal trust, while the older ones talked about general and institutional trust and interpersonal trust. For the youngest (11-12 years old), concretely, it is all about keeping a secret when we speak about interpersonal trust. For 14-15-year-olds, there has been the aspect of learning whom to trust, and whom not to, but based on confidentiality and integrity. However, it is less frequent among youngsters of 18-19 years old than in any other age group.

The pervasive sentiment among participants is general distrust, but their interventions during focus group discussions emphasise the importance of trust in people and institutions. They all think trust builds over time and hardship, and is easily lost and difficult to gain. They also think trust changes over time, and most participants also expressed

a change of trust in measures during the pandemic. When it comes to the theme of **"Consistency**,**"** the younger ones realise that arguments of social authorities and measures are changing (that there was a lack of consistency between them), and that it is bad for trust in institutions. However, the older people more seriously consider this theme, and think it is due to corrupt or politically-involved experts in the task force who are inconsistent. It is also noticeable from their narratives that the age group, 11-12 years old, is too young for these kinds of reflections on trust.

For each age group, it is important to rely on expert knowledge in times of crisis, but they also speak about how the pandemic revealed weaknesses in the system, causing distrust in institutions and social authorities (see the theme **"Knowledge, information, competence"**). This theme relates all age groups to the theme **"Autonomy, critical thinking, and similar values",** within which they speak about relying on their reasoning in the evaluation of information and competencies of social authorities. When it comes to age differences, this theme is found among all age groups, but it is primarily relevant for the 18-19-year-olds, probably because they are at that age where attaining autonomy and independence is one of the main developmental tasks.

Some participants express public trust in and compliance with the measures during the pandemic. This was a minor theme within the central theme, **"Temporality and process,"** created mainly from the responses of the youngest respondents, who were more trustful than the oldest group of participants. The oldest (30+) are very distrustful, except those with expertise in medical sciences who, they say, understand how to fight respiratory diseases.

The theme **"Doubts and conspiracies"** is present in the narratives of all age groups. It is mainly represented in the discussions among the oldest people, who elaborated widely on their ideas and prejudices. The most common source of doubt for them is the political manipulation of measures, and the involvement of the politics of interest among the task force. Among adolescents, this finding is exclusively related to their beliefs that ruling structures have financially gained from the pandemic against the interests of citizens. Among adults, it is related to the belief that the government (un)intentionally submits to the new global order, managed by one or more powerful actors, who are coordinated in secret action to achieve an outcome that is of public interest, but not public knowledge.

4.3 Limitations and future directions

Not all participants in the research reflected equally on some of the identified topics. Theme 6 of the **Consistency** of the authority's arguments and the applied measures proved challenging to discuss in the youngest age group, 11-12-year-olds. Also, participants from our sample discussed the sources of trust and distrust, rather than the definition of these terms.

It would be beneficial to further investigate the data from presented themes by linking them with concepts important for understanding the psychological factors underlying

some of the values presented here, such as social identification, collective narcissism, authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation.

There are also several other potential themes and important chunks of codes which are not represented in the final set of themes. These codes differ from the black-and-white stand of other participants, who think that trust in people is either good or bad. Some participants think that trust in people can be both good and bad; some can be trusted, and others cannot. Finally, some of the research participants identify the consequences of the pandemic, which can be significant in terms of researching the effects of the crisis and Covid measures on different age groups regarding their mental state during the crises, their coping mechanisms, and alienation processes within specific socio-cultural contexts.

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10. Survey-based Experiment

Jan Šerek and Jakub Brojáč

1. Introduction

This part of the report presents findings from the second phase of WP5 carried out as a follow-up to qualitative focus group interviews. We conducted a survey-based experiment in four countries (Czechia, Germany, Italy, and Serbia) to investigate how different aspects of authorities' behaviour translate into people's trust, distrust, and willingness to accept authoritative decisions. Consistent with the developmental perspective taken in the previous phase, our research involved four age groups: early adolescents (age 11-12), middle adolescents (age 14-15), late adolescents (18-19), and adults (age 30-50). This enabled us to examine not only which factors contribute to the building of (dis)trust in authorities, but also whether the relevance of these factors is stable or changing with age.

The approach taken in the experimental part of WP5 is grounded in the procedural model of justice and legitimacy (Blader & Tyler, 2003, 2009; Tyler, 2012; Tyler & Blader, 2000). The model emphasises people's assessments of the fairness of the procedures through which authorities make their decisions. These assessments, in turn, are expected to play a pivotal role in forming perceived people's (dis)trust in authorities and willingness to accept authoritative decisions. Two fundamental components of procedural fairness are typically considered – the quality of decision-making, referring to how decisions are made (e.g., whether the authorities act impartially), and the quality of treatment, referring to how people feel they are treated during the procedure (e.g., with dignity; Blader & Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Blader, 2000).

Our qualitative findings indicated that multiple aspects of authorities' behaviour might be relevant to the building of (dis)trust. For the purposes of the survey-based experiment, we selected three of them, also with respect to their roles in previous research on procedural justice and legitimacy:

1. **Voice**. The concept of voice refers to the ability of people to influence decision-making outcomes (e.g., Tyler, 2012). In addition to instrumental aspects of voice (direct control over the outcome), people are also often concerned with its symbolic, non-instrumental aspects. Thus, non-instrumental voice refers to the opportunity to express one's own views, even though this expression is unlikely to have any effect on the decision-making outcome (Platow et al., 2006, 2013). Our study focused on the form of a voice that is realistic in most cases of governmental decision-making: citizens or experts do not have direct control over the final outcome, but the authority considers their views.

2. **Transparency in rationale**. Authorities are often expected to exhibit at least some level of transparency, which can have two forms: transparency in process and transparency in rationale (de Fine Licht & Naurin 2022; Mansbridge, 2009). While the former form refers to transparency about the details of the decision-making process, the latter form refers to transparency about decisions, information, facts, and reasons, based on which the decisions are made. Because transparency in process is sometimes viewed as impractical and potentially having unintended consequences, transparency in rationale seems to be a more preferable alternative. This latter form of transparency was also used in our study.

3. **Predictable framework**. Providing a predictable framework means that authorities are clear about exactly how their decisions will be implemented, what the timeline will be, and under what conditions the decisions can change. By doing this, the authorities acknowledge people's need for a predictable environment, allow people to plan their activities, and show them respect. Providing a predictable framework was considered as a final aspect of authorities' behaviour in our study.

We had presumed the three aspects of authorities' behaviour (voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework) would play roles in people's (dis)trust and willingness to accept authoritative decisions. However, the exact nature of their effects and preconditions of the effects were unclear and open to investigation by our study.

First, building on observations from the qualitative part, it appeared essential to ask whether gaining trust can be compared to an "all-or-nothing" game, during which people trust authorities only if all aspects of their behaviour are perceived as positive, and even a single deviation from expected normative standards would lead to distrust. Alternatively, the trust-building process can be represented as a constant move on the continuum based on weighing and adding up different aspects of authorities' behaviour. Therefore, we investigated whether the joint effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework were conditional or additive. The conditionality of the effects means that individual aspects of authorities' behaviour per se do not affect (dis)trust, but a greater number of them must be simultaneously present. On the other hand, additive effects mean that the joint effect corresponds to the sum of individual effects, that is, the outcome variables change whenever an individual aspect changes.

Second, some versions of the procedural model of justice and legitimacy, such as the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003; Tyler, 2012), suggest that people focus on whether they are taken seriously and treated respectfully during their interactions with authorities. This is why they focus on procedural aspects of authorities' behaviour, based on which they form their sense of being respected by the authorities. The model further assumes that the effect of respectful treatment is explained by psychological processes related to social identity. Specifically, it is expected that when people experience positive interpersonal treatment from authorities, it makes them feel proud of their group and respected with regard to their status within the group.

Both feelings increase people's identification with the group, which, in turn, translates into greater trust (or lower distrust) or willingness to accept. We investigated an essential component of this presumed mechanism by testing whether feeling respected within the group (e.g., as a citizen of a country) served as a mediator between independent variables (voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework) and outcomes (trust, distrust, and willingness to accept).

Finally, our qualitative findings suggested that some aspects of trust-building might vary with age. This is consistent with more general findings on moral development, according to which the transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood is associated with a growing interest in practical elements of decision-making, and an increasing ability to consider a greater number of decision-making aspects, including those that can be relatively subtle or ambiguous (cf. Helwig, 2022). We, therefore, inspected whether the effects of the three aspects of authorities' behaviour were moderated by age. This analysis was predominantly exploratory with only a few tentative expectations. Because voice represents an apparent manifestation of positive interpersonal treatment, we assumed its effect to be present already in 11-year-olds. As for transparency in rationale and predictable framework, we assumed that these components of interpersonal treatment are more subtle than voice, and are thus less appreciated at a young age. In other words, we expected their effects to increase in older age groups.

Summary of research questions

Our research questions were as follows:

RQ1: How are the aspects of authorities' behaviour – voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework – related to people's (dis)trust in authority and willingness to accept an authority's decisions?

All three aspects were expected to have positive effects on the outcome variables (i.e., their presence was expected to predict greater trust, smaller distrust, and greater acceptance). The voice was understood as either the voice of citizens or the voice of experts (versus nobody's voice), and both types of voice were expected to yield positive effects.

RQ2: Are the presumed effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework additive or conditional?

RQ3: Does the sense of being respected mediate the presumed effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework?

RQ4: Are the presumed effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework moderated by age?

We operationalised trust as people's willingness to accept their vulnerability to the acts of authority. Distrust was operationalised as a tendency to question an authority

and its decisions. Finally, willingness to accept referred to a motivation to obey decisions, recommendations, or rules issued by the authority.

To ensure the robustness of our findings, we conducted independent tests of the presumed effects in four national contexts (Czechia, Germany, Italy, and Serbia). These contexts were characterised by varying overall levels of institutional trust and political situation (e.g., old/new/no membership in the EU). In addition, we tested whether the effects hold up for authorities at different levels: the national level, involving governmental decision-making and the everyday level, involving decision-making by the school or company management. No specific context-specific effects were expected as it was presumed that the same pattern of effects replicates across diverse contexts.

We also controlled for other variables to ensure that the effects could be attributed to the experimental manipulations. First, we controlled for generalised interpersonal trust, a basic trust in people in common social situations. Second, we controlled for institutional trust, which was, for the purposes of our analysis, represented by trust toward the national government. Finally, we controlled for the effects of gender to allow for potential variations in the gender composition of the subsamples, and ensure that the effects of experimental manipulation were not gender specific. The conceptual plan of the study is summarised in Figure 10.1.

Figure 10.1. The conceptual plan of the study
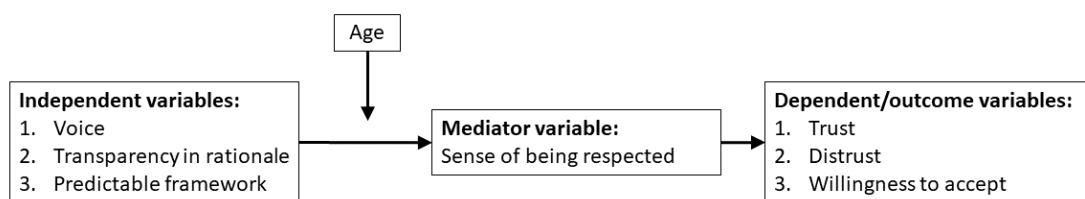
Control variables: generalised interpersonal trust, trust in government, gender effects
Effects robust across: countries, national vs everyday level

2. Research design

We conducted a vignette survey-based experiment, with a mixed design, combining between and within-subject components.

An essential part of the survey was formed by vignettes that were randomly assigned to participants (between-subject). Every vignette described a hypothetical situation involving an authority deciding on some relevant issue. The introductory section of the vignette was identical for every participant, but the presence of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework varied. There were three voice conditions (no voice, voice given to citizens, and voice given to experts), two conditions regarding transparency in rationale (yes/no), and two conditions regarding predictable framework (yes/no). This, in total, created 12 variants of the vignettes (=experimental groups), which can be seen in Table 10.1. Participants read the vignettes and indicated

how much they would have (dis)trusted the authority and been willing to accept the decision in such a situation.

Table 10.1. Overview of the experimental conditions

Variant / ex-perimental group	Voice	Transparency in rationale	Predictable framework
1	no	no	no
2	no	no	yes
3	no	yes	no
4	no	yes	yes
5	citizens	no	no
6	citizens	no	yes
7	citizens	yes	no
8	citizens	yes	yes
9	experts	no	no
10	experts	no	yes
11	experts	yes	no
12	experts	yes	yes

Every participant read and rated two vignettes (within-subject): one describing the national-level decision-making by a government, and one describing everyday-level decision-making by a management team of a school (age 11-18) or a company (age 30-50). The random assignment of specific variants of the vignettes was mutually independent for both levels.

Besides the vignettes and follow-up measures of the outcome variables, the survey included mandatory scales on generalised interpersonal and institutional trust, and items on basic socio-demographic information.

Pilot

A pilot version of the questionnaire was distributed online to participants aged 11 to 50 in Czechia (n = 317) and Germany (n = 224), and participants aged 30 to 50 in Italy (n = 51) and Serbia (n = 52). Furthermore, individual cognitive interviews with participants from the youngest group were conducted. The vignettes were slightly modified, and some items were reworded or omitted based on the pilot. In addition, several items were newly created to complement the distrust scale.

Final research materials

Vignettes

All vignettes can be found in Table 10.2. The "government" vignette was used in all age groups to represent the national context. The everyday context was represented by the "school management" vignette in all groups, except for the oldest group aged 30-50 where the "company management" vignette was used.

Table 10.2. Overview of the vignettes

	National context	Everyday context	
	Government	School management	Company management
Core	Imagine that another pandemic of infectious disease is coming to our country. It can be a strong flu or another variant of Covid. The government have to take action. It seems that the mandatory testing and wearing of facemasks in some places are the most effective moves at this moment. Therefore, the government assemble and decide on specific places where facemasks will be mandatory. They also determine in which situations people have to take tests. All measures are first announced on the evening television news by the health minister.	Imagine that you visit a school where several cases of cyberbullying using mobile phones have happened recently. Some students used their phones to mock and humiliate others. Students, teachers, and parents think that the school management has to do something because the bullying has been very serious and might happen again and again. Therefore, the school management decides to take tough steps. They decide to impose a ban on using mobile phones. Students are banned from using their mobile phones in the classroom under fear of penalty. This decision is announced to students at a joint meeting with the management.	Imagine that you work for a company very close to your home. Due to economic decline, the company has to save on costs. Therefore, the management decide that the company will move to a town where a cheaper building can be found, which is located 30 kilometres from the current location. This means longer everyday commuting and other complications for most of the employees. This decision is announced to employees at a joint meeting with the management.

Voice: no	The government decide on the measures by themselves. They are not interested in the opinions of citizens or experts, and do not take them into account when making decisions.	The management decide on the measures by themselves. They are not interested in the opinions of citizens or experts and do not take them into account when making decisions.	The management decide on the measures by themselves. They are not interested in the opinions of employees or experts and do not take them into account when making decisions.
Voice: citizens	The government are interested in citizens' opinions before taking a decision. When deciding, they carefully consider all public opinion polls on this issue, and petitions from ordinary citizens.	The management are interested in students' opinions before taking a decision. When deciding, they collect students' opinions using anonymous online polls or pieces of paper and consider students' opinions carefully.	The management are interested in employees' opinions before taking a decision. When deciding, they collect employees' opinions using anonymous online polls and consider employees' opinions carefully.
Voice: experts	The government are interested in expert opinions before they take a decision. When deciding, they assemble a board of experts in epidemiology, virology, sociology, economy and related disciplines. All measures are thoroughly consulted with these experts.	The management are interested in expert opinions before they take a decision. When deciding, they approach academic experts in cyberbullying, youth workers, and experienced teachers. The ban on using phones is thoroughly consulted with these experts.	The management are interested in expert opinions before they take a decision. When deciding, they approach experts in economics to find a response to economic decline acceptable for all sides. The decision to move is thoroughly consulted with these experts.
Transparency in rationale: no	The government do not explain their decision in any way. They simply present their final decision to the citizens without providing specific reasons for the decision. They also do not explain why such a solution has been	The management do not explain their decision in any way. They present to the students only their final decision but not the specific reasons based on which the decision has been made. They also do not explain why such a solution has been	The management do not explain their decision in any way. They present to the employees only their final decision but not the specific reasons based on which the decision has been made. They also do not explain why such a solution has been

	chosen over other options.	chosen over other options.	chosen over other options.
Transparency in rationale: yes	The government do their best to explain the decision carefully. The government shed light on all reasons, arguments, and facts that have been considered. They make it clear why they prefer the current solution over other possibilities.	The management do their best to explain the decision carefully. The management shed light on all reasons, arguments, and facts that have been considered. They make it clear why they prefer the current solution over other possibilities.	The management do their best to explain the decision carefully. The management shed light on all reasons, arguments, and facts that have been considered. They make it clear why they prefer the current solution over other possibilities.
Predictable framework: no	The government present their decision saying that it will probably change continuously. People thus do not have a clear plan of what measures will be taken and when. It is also difficult for people to prepare for the measures in advance.	The management present their decision saying that it will probably change continuously. Students thus do not have a clear plan of what measures will be taken and when. It is also difficult for students to prepare for the measures in advance.	The management present their decision saying that it will probably change continuously. Employees thus do not have a clear plan of what measures will be taken and when. It is also difficult for employees to prepare for the measures in advance.
Predictable framework: yes	Even though the situation can suddenly change, the government want to give people some certainty. They present people with a clear plan, showing them what measures will be taken and when. This helps people to prepare in advance.	The management want to give students some certainty. They present students with a clear plan regarding when the ban will be imposed, how the ban will be monitored, and what the penalty will look like. This helps students to prepare in advance.	The management want to give employees some certainty. They present employees with a clear plan, showing when exactly the move will take place and the order in which the departments will move. This helps employees to prepare in advance.

Outcome and mediator variables

Outcome and mediator variables were measured using questionnaire scales. All response scales had five points, usually ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The option, "I can't answer", was also offered.

Trust was measured using four items partly adapted from Hamm et al. (2017, 2019): "I would be comfortable with being vulnerable to the judgement of such a government/management," "I would be open to letting such a government/management make more decisions about issues that are important to me," "I would be comfortable with letting such a government/management make more decisions that may affect my future," and "I would expect that letting such a government/management make decisions won't harm me." The internal consistency of the scale in the whole sample was very good ($\omega = 0.86$ in the school/company context, $\omega = 0.89$ in the government context). In individual countries, the internal consistency varied from good $\omega = 0.81$ (the school context in Italy) to very good $\omega = 0.92$ (the government context in Serbia).

Distrust was measured using four items created for this study (the third item is reversed): "I would have no faith in the actions and decisions of such a government/management," "I would regularly question the actions and decisions of such a government/management," "I would follow the instructions and rules of such a government/management without reservation," and "I would verify statements and actions of such a government/management using independent sources of information." The internal consistency of the scale in the whole sample was slightly below, but close to the acceptable level ($\omega = 0.67$ in the school/company context, $\omega = 0.69$ in the government context). In individual countries, the internal consistency varied from $\omega = 0.64$ (school context in Czechia) to $\omega = 0.72$ (school context in Germany).

Willingness to accept was measured using three items from Šerek et al. (2022): "I would accept the decision," "I wouldn't mind accepting the decision," and "I could deal with the decision." The internal consistency of the scale in the whole sample was good to very good ($\omega = 0.82$ in the school/company context, $\omega = 0.88$ in the government context). In individual countries, the internal consistency varied from acceptable $\omega = 0.77$ (school version of the scale in Czechia) to very good $\omega = 0.91$ (government version of the scale in Serbia).

Sense of being respected was measured using three items based on Tyler and Blader (2000) and Blader and Tyler (2009): "I would feel respected as a citizen/student/employee in a country with such a government/in such a school/in such a company," "I would think I have value in a country with such a government/in my school/in my company," and "I would feel like I mattered in a country with such a government/in my school/in my company." The internal consistency of the scale in the whole sample was good to very good ($\omega = 0.89$ in the school/company context, $\omega = 0.91$ in the government context). In individual countries, the internal consistency was very good, and varied from $\omega = 0.87$ (school version of the scale in Czechia) to $\omega = 0.96$ (government version of the scale in Serbia).

Control variables

Generalised interpersonal trust was measured using items taken from previous studies (Baltatescu, 2009; Couch et al., 1996; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). The final five items were selected based on the study by Zhang (2021): "Most people are trustworthy," "Most people are basically good and kind," "Most people are basically honest," "Most people can be trusted," and "Most of the time, people are helpful." The internal consistency of the scale in the whole sample was very good (ω = 0.86). In individual countries, the internal consistency varied from acceptable ω = 0.79 (in Czechia) to very good ω = 0.91 (in Italy).

Institutional trust was measured using the approach by OECD (2017). Participants were asked to indicate their trust in five institutions: national government, local government, European Union, the police, and courts. The internal consistency of the scale in the whole sample was good (ω = 0.84). In individual countries, the internal consistency varied from acceptable ω = 0.74 (in Czechia) to very good ω = 0.87 (in Italy). However, confirmatory factor analysis and the analysis of measurement invariance showed that the scale measured different constructs across countries and age groups (neither metric nor scalar invariance was established; for criteria, see Putnick and Bornstein, 2016; Schreiber et al., 2006). This means that the scale items were were important in different ways across age groups and countries. A single item on national government was therefore used in the analysis.

Measurement invariance

Overall, for most of the scales (except for an institutional trust scale), metric invariance across countries and age groups were established, meaning that the scales measure the same constructs in different countries and across different age groups. On the other hand, scalar level of invariance was often not established for most of the scales. Therefore, readers should be careful when comparing individual means for experimental conditions across countries and age groups. Instead, the focus should be on the overall effect of the experimental manipulations across countries—how well the experimental manipulations work in different countries and across age groups, whether they can be explained by certain trends, and if the effects are mediated through other variables.

Sample

Data were collected to ensure sufficient representation of people from the four age groups in all countries. The procedure slightly varied between countries due to practical reasons. Participants in Germany and Italy, and participants aged 11-12 and 14-15 in Serbia, were targeted mainly using panels provided by professional companies. Participants aged 18-19 and 30-50 in Serbia and Czechia were targeted using snowballing and advertisements on social networking sites. Finally, participants aged 11-12, 14-15,

and partly 18-19 in Czechia were targeted via public schools. All participants completed online questionnaires except for participants targeted via schools, who completed printed questionnaires.

The research design has been reviewed and approved by the research ethics committees of the participating universities. Data collection among minors was contingent on the consent of their parents. Only anonymous quantitative data were collected.

The final number of people who participated in the study and finished the questionnaire can be found in Table 10.3.

Table 10.3. Participants recruited for the study

	11-12			14-15			18-19			30-50		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Czechia	52.3%	44.9%	215	47.8%	49.1%	231	37.8%	57.9%	280	55%	42.8%	318
Germany	51.1%	48.9%	225	50%	50%	229	33,2%	65.6%	250	65.3%	34.7%	249
Italy	80.6%	18.9%	217	66.1%	33.5%	236	38.2%	61.0%	228	50.2%	49.5%	563
Serbia	55.7%	44.3%	210	47%	53.0%	200	16.1%	81.1%	217	22.4%	77.1%	214
Total	60%	39.2%	867	53 %	46.1%	896	31.9%	65.7%	975	49.7%	49.5%	1344

Online data collection poses a well-known risk of insufficient attention being paid to research materials and careless responding of some participants. Because our experimental manipulation involved reading and comprehending two longer texts, participants who paid only limited attention to experimental vignettes had to be identified to ensure unbiased results of our study. Thus, we determined four minutes to be a reasonable minimum time necessary to read the vignettes and complete the questionnaire. This threshold was also consistent with the analysis of careless response patterns (Gottfried et al., 2022), which suggested that the number of response patterns considerably decreased when participants spent four or more minutes on the questionnaire.

The largest proportions of participants who completed online questionnaires in less than four minutes were among those recruited from panels provided by professional companies. Thus, the proportions were relatively high in Italy (33.8 %) and Germany (14.5 %), and smaller in Czechia (1 %) and Serbia (1 %). The final sample (N = 3518) was sufficient for planned analyses, and consisted of more than 800 participants per country (NCzechia = 1041, NGermany = 815, NItaly = 823, NSerbia = 839). All age groups were represented by more than 200 participants in every age group per country, with a certain deviation in the Italian sample, where almost half of the sample was formed of participants aged 30-50 (397), and other age groups were smaller (120, 160, 146), but were still sufficient for the analytical purposes.

3. Results

We performed our analyses in five steps. First, we inspected the combined effects of experimental conditions to assess the overall effectiveness of our experimental manipulation. Second, we assessed the unique effects of experimental conditions: voice, transparency in rationale, and predicable framework (RQ1). Third, we investigated the trends of experimental conditions to see whether their effects were additive or conditional (RQ2). Fourth, we tested the mediation of experimental conditions through the sense of being respected (RQ3). Finally, we tested whether the effects of experimental conditions were moderated by age (RQ4). All analyses were conducted country by country and separately for the national (government vignette) and the everyday (school/company vignette) context.

Our analyses involved three experimental conditions: voice (0 = no voice, 1 = citizen voice, 2 = expert voice), transparency in rationale (0 = no, 1 = yes), and predictable framework (0 = no, 1 = yes). Dependent variables were trust, distrust, and willingness to accept. In addition, there was one mediator variable (sense of being respected) and three control variables (gender, generalised interpersonal trust, and trust in government). All variables measured by multiple items were created as mean scores, with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 5. All these variables were approximately normally distributed according to Q-Q plots.

Preliminary correlation analyses showed significant correlations between dependent, control, and mediator variables (Table 10.4). Dependent and mediator variables were strongly correlated in both the national and everyday contexts. The correlations were similarly strong, and in both contexts, there was a pattern of stronger correlations between positive variables (trust, willingness to accept, and respect). Distrust correlated with other variables, moderately at most. There were only small to moderate cross-context correlations between dependent variables, which shows the diversity of these contexts. Finally, generalised interpersonal trust correlated similarly strongly with dependent variables from both contexts. In contrast, trust in government correlated more strongly with dependent variables from the national context.

Table 10.4. Correlation of dependent, control, and mediator variables for the everyday (E) and the national (N) contexts

	Trust (N)	Accept (N)	Distrust (N)	Respect (N)	Trust (E)	Accept (E)	Distrust (E)	Respect (E)	Interp trust	Gov. trust
Trust (N)	-									
Accept (N)	0.76	-								
Distrust (N)	-0.52	-0.48	-							
Respect (N)	0.81	0.74	-0.50	-						
Trust (E)	0.32	0.23	-0.10	0.30	-					
Accept (E)	0.28	0.33	-0.11	0.29	0.71	-				
Distrust (E)	-0.10	-0.06	0.30	-0.10	-0.49	-0.45	-			

|										
Respect (E)	0.28	0.21	-0.10	0.34	0.76	0.69	-0.44	-		
Interp. trust	0.27	0.24	-0.06	0.29	0.28	0.25	-0.08	0.25	-	
Gov. trust	0.45	0.40	-0.29	0.46	0.30	0.28	-0.18	0.28	0.40	-

Note. Pearson correlations were computed pairwise.

Combined effects of experimental conditions (the effectiveness of experimental manipulation)

The analysis of combined effects of experimental conditions can be understood as an overall check of the effectiveness of experimental manipulation in every country. We inspected these effects visually and by one-way analyses of variance. We compared twelve experimental conditions labelled from 000 to 211 (the three numbers, from left to right, represent voice, transparency in rationale, and predicable framework; e.g., 200 denotes the condition where there is an expert voice, while transparency in rationale and predictable framework are absent).

As can be seen from Figure 10.2, the experimental manipulations worked well in the national context. The means of all dependent variables substantively varied across different experimental conditions. There was also a clear trend between the experimental conditions: trust and willingness to accept were lowest for the most negative condition (000), increased when positive aspects were present, and were highest for the experimental conditions consisting of only positive aspects (111, 211). Hence, an additive trend could be visually observed. A similar trend in the opposite direction was present for distrust.

Figure 10.2. Combined effects of experimental conditions in the national context
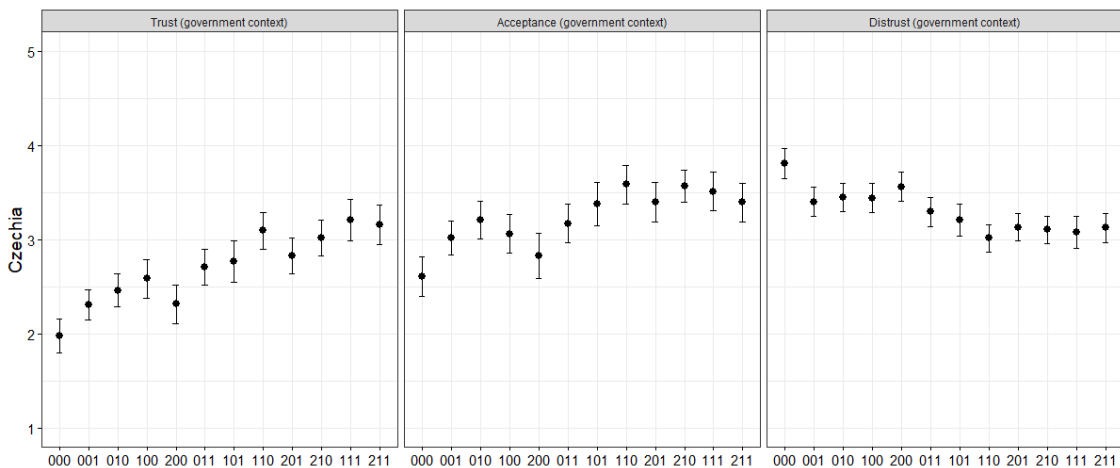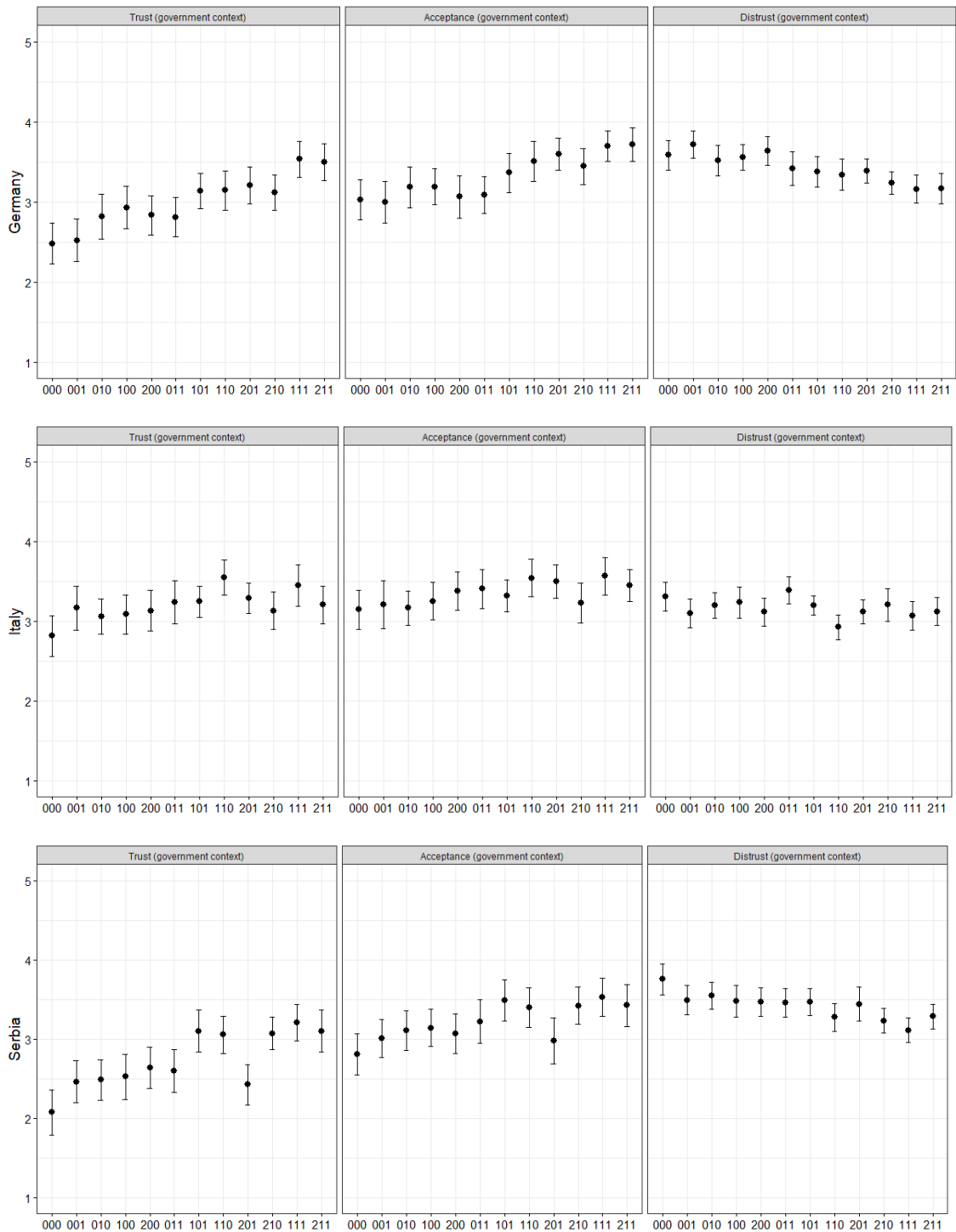
Results for the everyday context, shown in Figure 10.3, were similar to the national one. Trust and willingness to accept were lowest in the most negative conditions (000) and highest in the most positive conditions (111, 211), while the effect on distrust was reversed.

Figure 10.3. Combined effects of experimental conditions in the everyday context
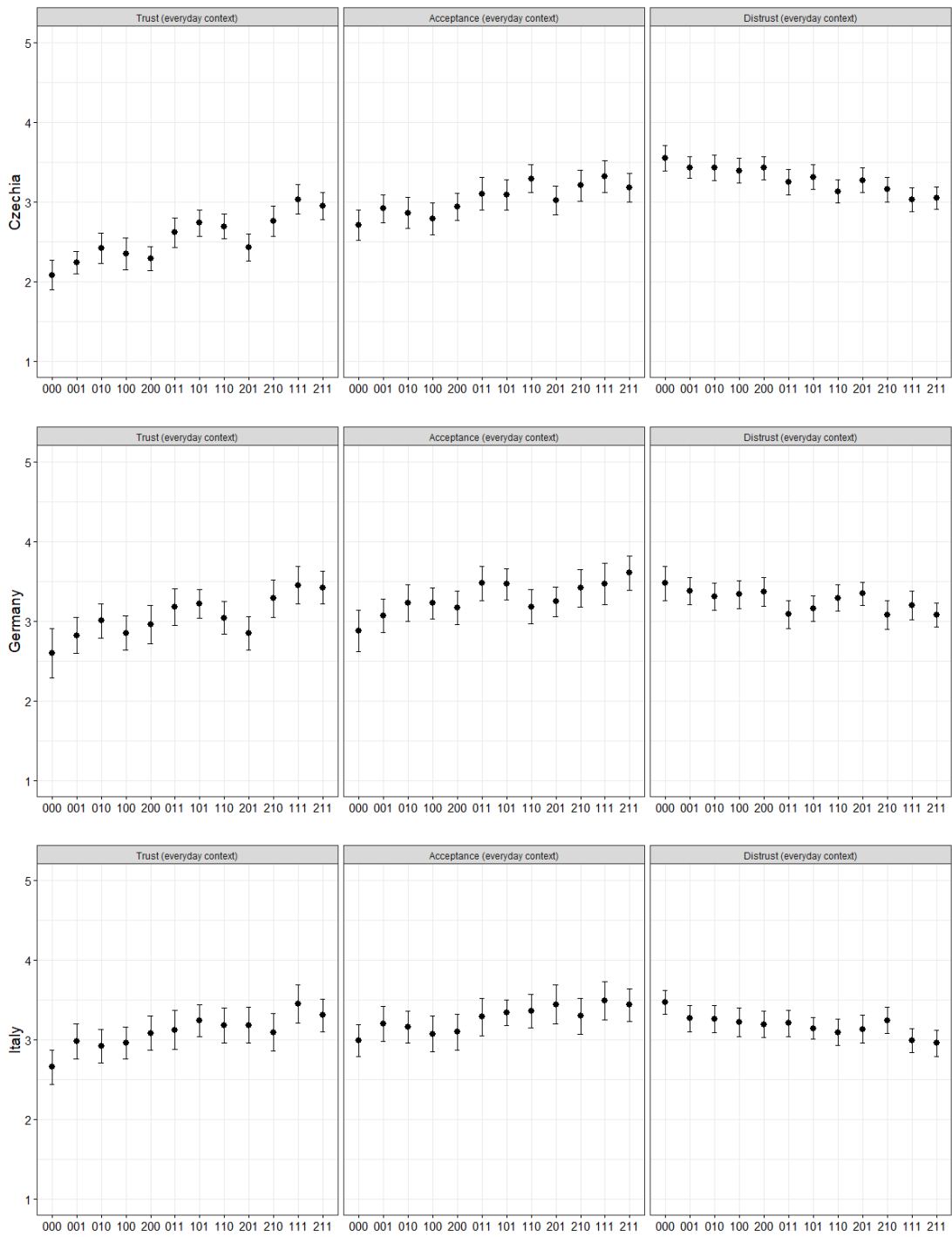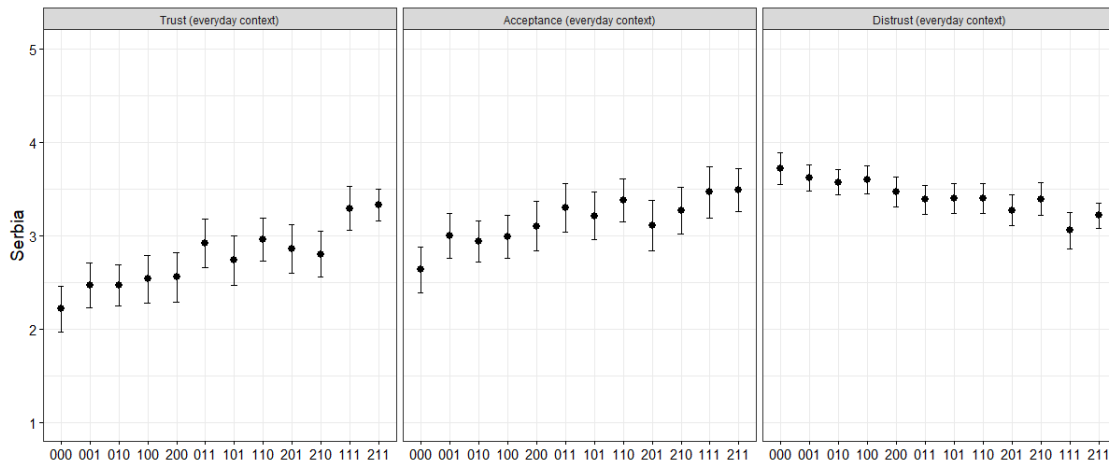
Table 10.5 shows effect sizes (η2) for the overall combined effects of experimental manipulations across contexts and countries. Every effect is directly comparable to the figures above, and represents how much the means varied between the twelve experimental conditions. Analyses of variance showed statistically significant ($p < .05$) effects of the experimental manipulation for every dependent variable in both contexts in every country. The only exception was the missing effect on willingness to accept in the national context in Italy. Overall, the largest effects, and thus the most salient experimental manipulation, were present in Czechia, while the smallest effects were present in Italy.

Table 10.5. Effect sizes for the combined effects of experimental conditions

National context		Trust	Willingness to accept	Distrust
	Czechia	.15	.09	.09
	Germany	.09	.07	.05
	Italy	.03	.02 (n.s.)	.03
	Serbia	.10	.04	.05
Everyday context		Trust	Acceptance	Distrust
	Czechia	.11	.05	.05
	Germany	.07	.05	.03
	Italy	.05	.03	.04
	Serbia	.09	.05	.07

Note. Reported numbers are partial η^2.

RQ1: Unique effects of experimental conditions

To assess the unique effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework, we conducted factorial analyses of variance with covariates, involving the main effects of these factors (controlling for gender, generalised interpersonal trust, and trust in government). Because voice had three levels, we first inspected whether its main effect was significant, and if so, we interpreted pairwise comparisons between marginal means with Bonferroni correction.

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Results presented in Table 10.6 showed that despite occasional country and context-specific patterns, all three factors had expected effects in the vast majority of cases. The effects were small to medium, and not systematically larger in the national or the everyday contexts. Trust seemed to be somewhat more affected than distrust or willingness to accept. The effects of voice and transparency were generally more pronounced than the effect of predictable framework. A common pattern for voice was that both citizen and expert voice mattered, while the effects of both types of voice were of comparable sizes.

Table 10.6. Main effects of individual experimental conditions

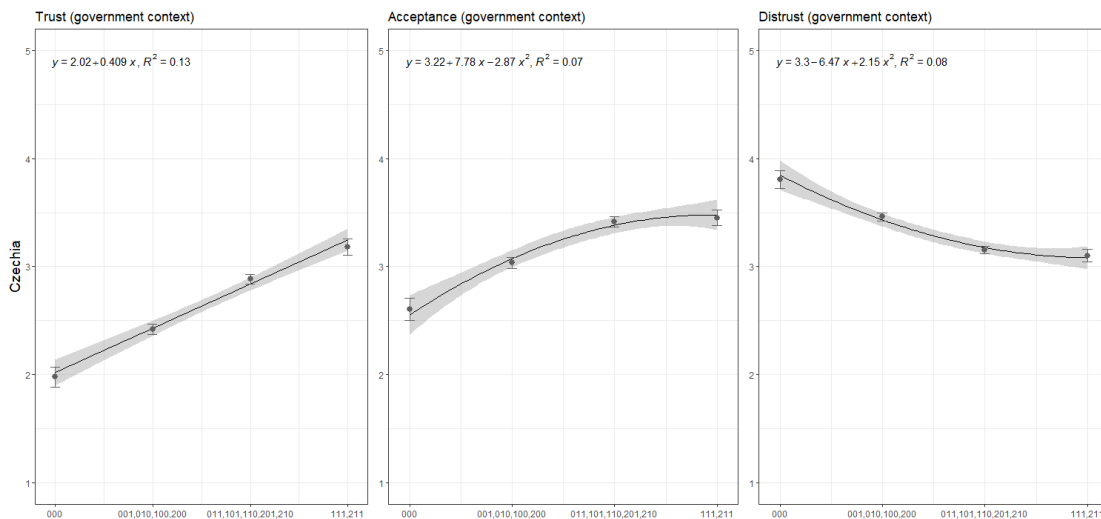|		Voice				Transparency in rationale		Predictable framework	
Trust									
National context	Czechia	↗	↗	–	.10	↗	.10	↗	.02
	Germany	↗	↗	–	.07	↗	.03	↗	.01
	Italy	↗	–	–	.01	↗	.01	↗	.01
	Serbia	↗	↗	–	.05	↗	.04	↗	.01
Everyday context	Czechia	↗	↗	–	.04	↗	.06	↗	.02
	Germany	↗	↗	–	.02	↗	.03	↗	.01
	Italy	↗	↗	–	.03	↗	.01	↗	.02
	Serbia	↗	↗	–	.03	↗	.04	↗	.03
Distrust									
National context	Czechia	↘	↘	–	.04	↘	.04	↘	.02
	Germany	↘	↘	–	.01	↘	.03	–	.00
	Italy	–	–	–	.01	–	.00	–	.00
	Serbia	↘	↘	–	.02	↘	.02	–	.00
Everyday context	Czechia	↘	↘	–	.02	↘	.03	↘	.01
	Germany	–	↘	–	.01	↘	.01	–	.01
	Italy	↘	↘	–	.02	↘	.01	↘	.01
	Serbia	↘	↘	–	.03	↘	.02	↘	.03
Willingness to accept									
National context	Czechia	↗	↗	–	.04	↗	.05	↗	.01
	Germany	↗	↗	–	.03	↗	.02	–	.00
	Italy	–	–	–	.01	–	.00	↗	.01
	Serbia	↗	↗	–	.02	↗	.02	–	.00
Everyday context	Czechia	↗	↗	–	.02	↗	.02	↗	.01
	Germany	↗	↗	–	.01	↗	.01	↗	.01
	Italy	↗	–	–	.01	↗	.01	↗	.02
	Serbia	↗	↗	–	.01	↗	.02	↗	.01

Note. ↗ or ↘ indicates a statistically significant ($p < .05$) positive or negative effect of the condition. – indicates no significant effect. For voice, the first symbol represents the effect of citizen voice (versus no voice); the second symbol represents the effect of expert voice (versus no voice); the third symbol indicates whether there is a significant difference between citizen versus expert voice. Reported numbers are partial η^2.
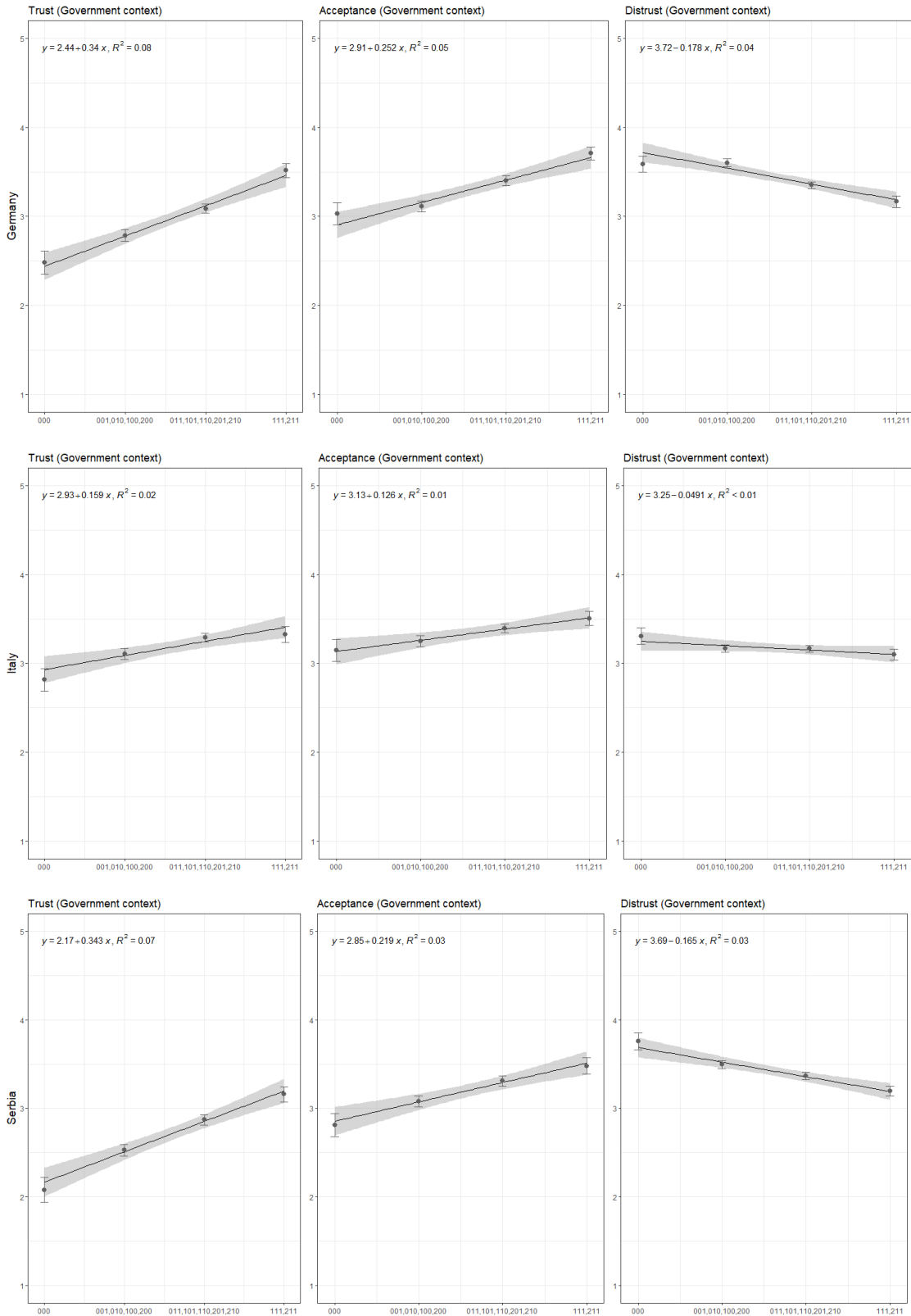
RQ2: Trends of the experimental conditions

Next, we explored if the effects of experimental conditions were characterised by linear or quadratic trends. The linear association between the number of positive aspects of authoritative decision-making and dependent variables would have suggested additivity, while the quadratic trend would have suggested that the effects were conditional. For our analysis, we recoded the experimental conditions into four groups: no positive aspect (000), one positive aspect (100, 200, 010, 001), two positive aspects (110, 210, 101, 201, 011), and all positive aspects (111, 211). Regression analyses were used to test whether the linear and quadratic effects of the number of positive aspects contribute to the explained variance of dependent variables.

In most countries, the trends were clearly linear in the national context (see Figure 10.4). Trust and willingness to accept increased, while distrust decreased with a growing number of positive procedural aspects of authoritative decision-making. The only quadratic trend was observed in Czechia for acceptance and distrust. In these cases, the most salient difference was between the completely negative condition (000) and conditions with one positive aspect. In contrast, the shift from two to three positive aspects had much smaller effects. Overall, the linear (and occasional quadratic) trends explained the greatest proportion of variance in Czechia and the lowest in Italy (where the linear trend for distrust was not statistically significant).

Figure 10.4. Trends of the experimental conditions in the national context

Trust (Government context)

$y = 2.44 + 0.34\,x,\ R^2 = 0.08$

Acceptance (Government context)

$y = 2.91 + 0.252\,x,\ R^2 = 0.05$

Distrust (Government context)

$y = 3.72 - 0.178\,x,\ R^2 = 0.04$

Trust (Government context)

$y = 2.93 + 0.159\,x,\ R^2 = 0.02$

Acceptance (Government context)

$y = 3.13 + 0.126\,x,\ R^2 = 0.01$

Distrust (Government context)

$y = 3.25 - 0.0491\,x,\ R^2 < 0.01$

Trust (Government context)

$y = 2.17 + 0.343\,x,\ R^2 = 0.07$

Acceptance (Government context)

$y = 2.85 + 0.219\,x,\ R^2 = 0.03$

Distrust (Government context)

$y = 3.69 - 0.165\,x,\ R^2 = 0.03$

Note. Regression equations are shown indicating the mean (intercept) when no positive aspect is present (y) and how steep the linear (x) or quadratic (x^2) trends are if the number of positive aspects is changed by one. R^2 represents the explained variance by the models.

The trends were similar in the everyday context (see Figure 10.5). While trust and willingness to accept increased with the addition of positive procedural aspects, distrust decreased. All trends were linear, with none of the quadratics trends being statistically

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significant. The linear effect was the smallest in Italy and of similar sizes in Czechia, Germany, and Serbia.

Figure 10.5. Trends of the experimental conditions in the everyday context
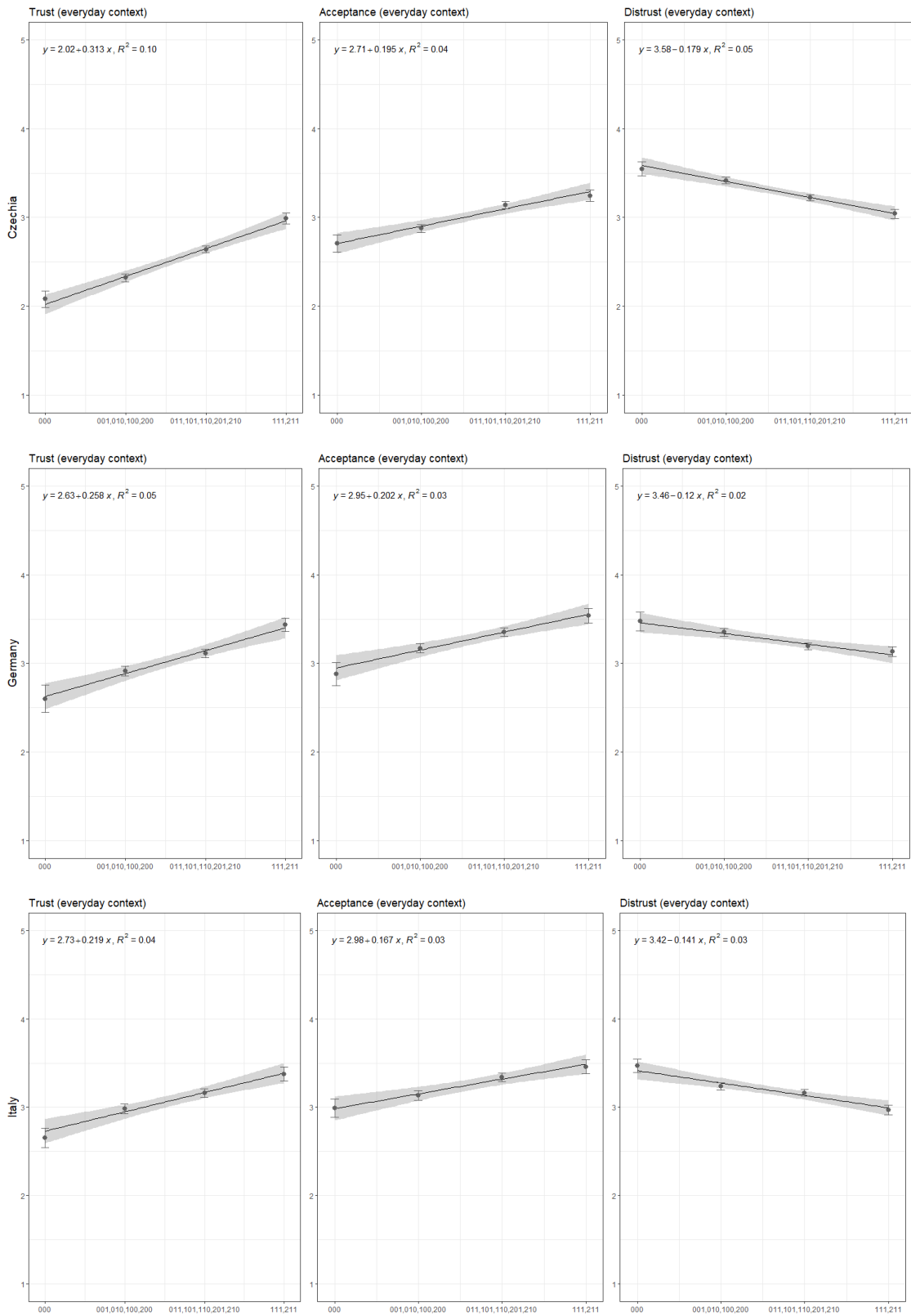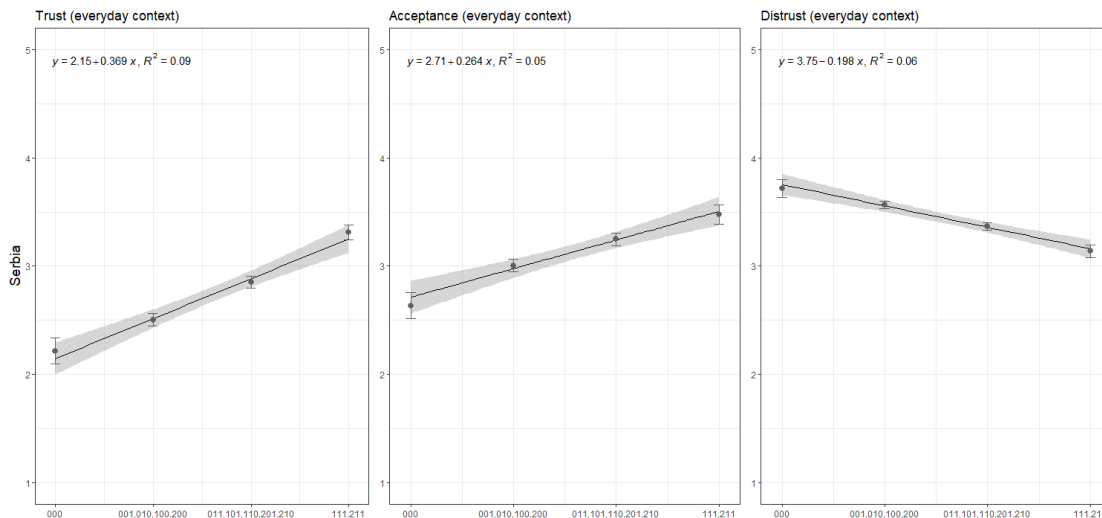
Trust (everyday context)   Acceptance (everyday context)   Distrust (everyday context)

$y = 2.15 + 0.369\,x,\ R^2 = 0.09$ $y = 2.71 + 0.264\,x,\ R^2 = 0.05$ $y = 3.75 - 0.198\,x,\ R^2 = 0.06$

Note. Regression equations are shown indicating the mean (intercept) when no positive aspect is present (y), and how steep the linear (x) or quadratic (x^2) trends are if the number of positive aspects is changed by one. R^2 represents the explained variance by the models.

Overall, similar linear trends were present in all countries, with only two quadratic effects found in Czechia (for willingness to accept and distrust). Thus, the results showed that adding the positive procedural aspects of authoritative decision-making systematically increased trust and acceptance, and decreased distrust. The quadratic effects in Czechia also showed that, in some cases, applying at least some positive procedural aspect (versus none) could be more important than striving for a greater number of them.

RQ3: Mediation of experimental conditions through respect

The path analysis tested whether the effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework could be understood as mediated by people's sense of being respected. We started with estimating a full mediation model for every country and context. If the full mediation model deviated from the data ($\chi2$ with p-value > .01), we tested, outcome by outcome, whether non-mediated direct effects were present ($\chi2$-difference tests). Because voice had three levels, the model was always estimated separately for the citizen voice and the expert voice condition (comparing both conditions with the no voice condition). The final models are displayed in Figure 10.6.

Figure 10.6. Mediation models
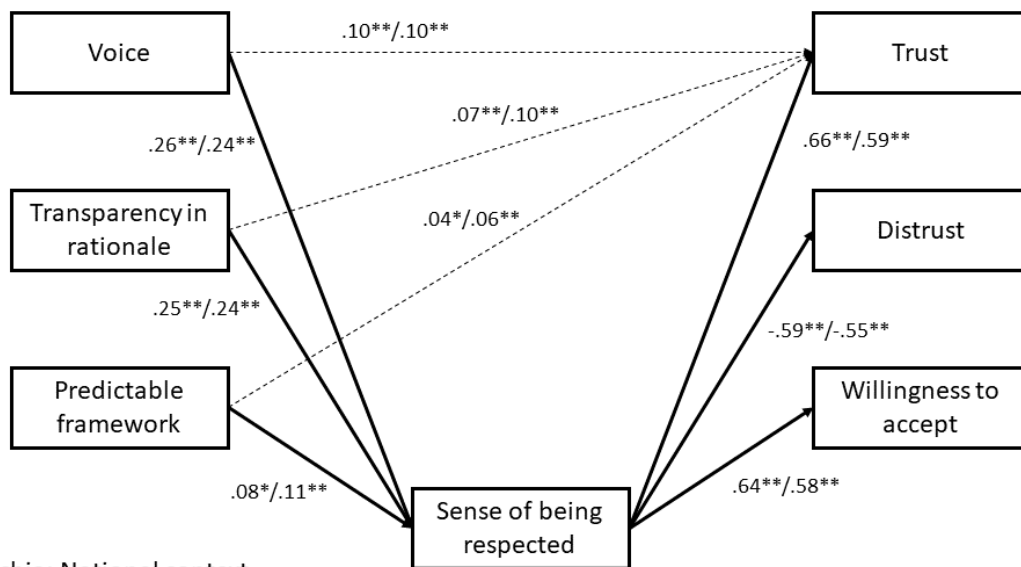
Czechia: National context

Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 10.95, df = 6, p = 0.09; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.01
Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 12.67, df = 6, p = 0.05; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.01
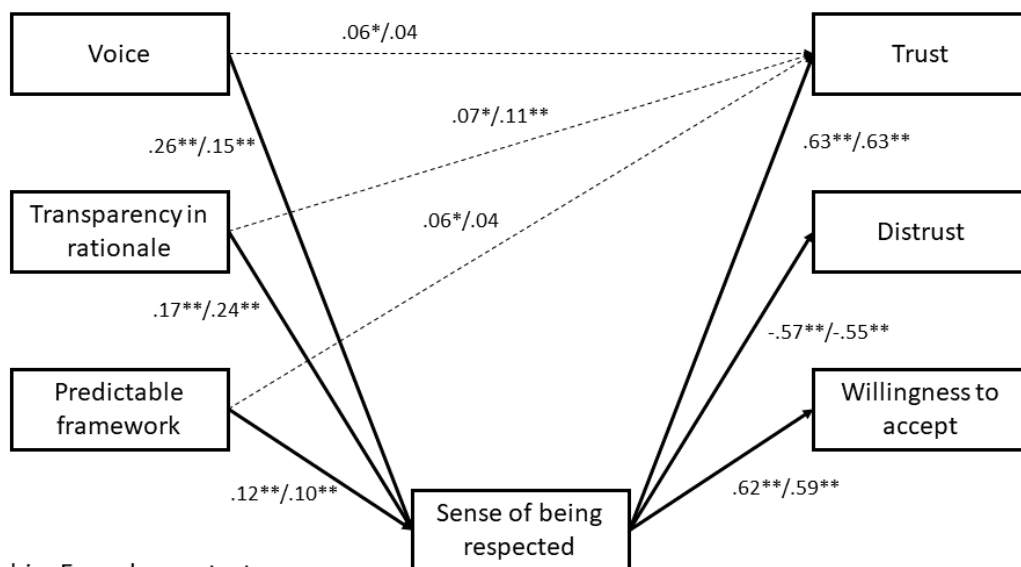
Czechia: Everyday context

Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 7.68, df = 6, p = 0.26; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.02; SRMR = 0.01
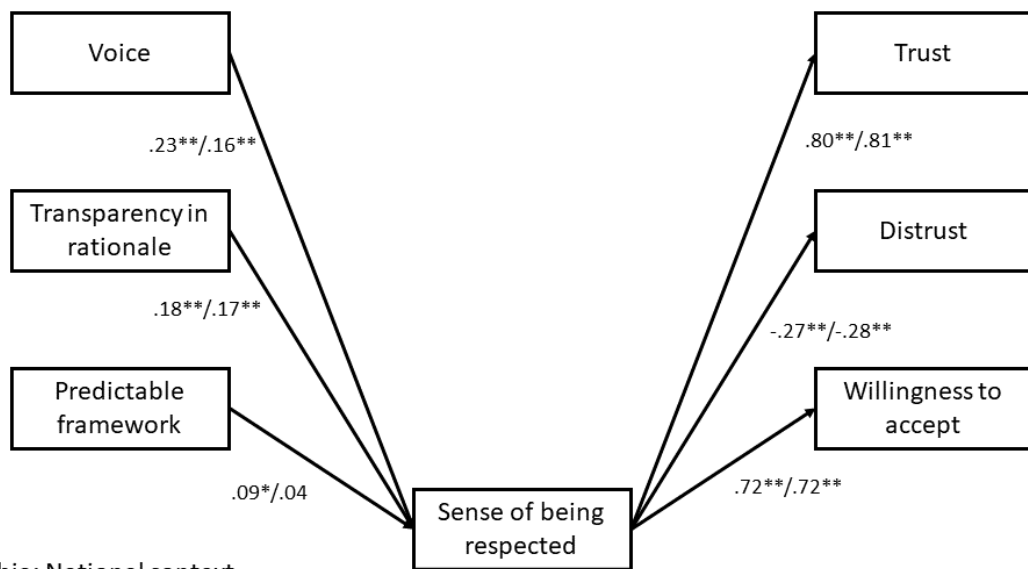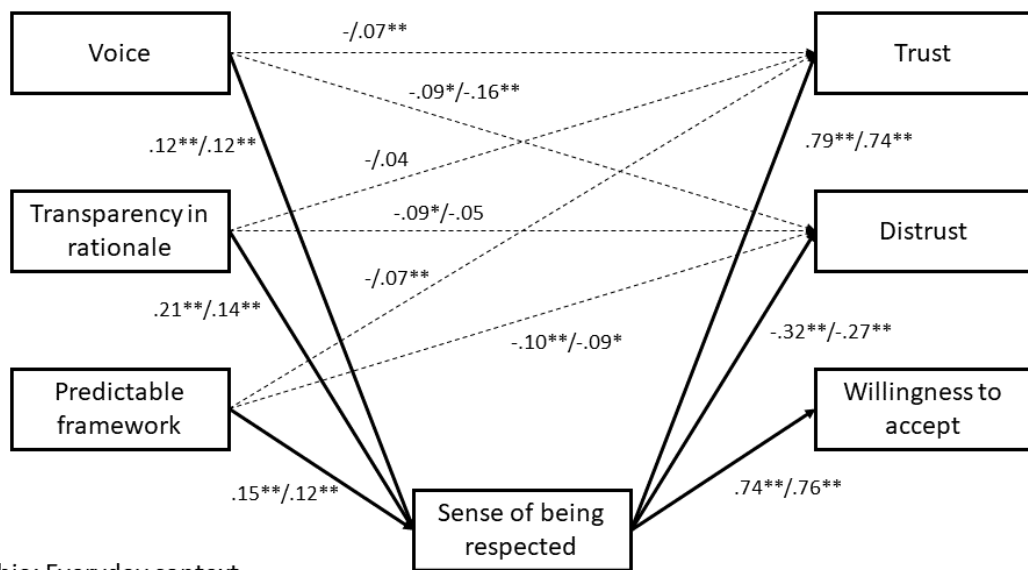Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 5.84, df = 6, p = 0.44; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.01

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Germany: National context
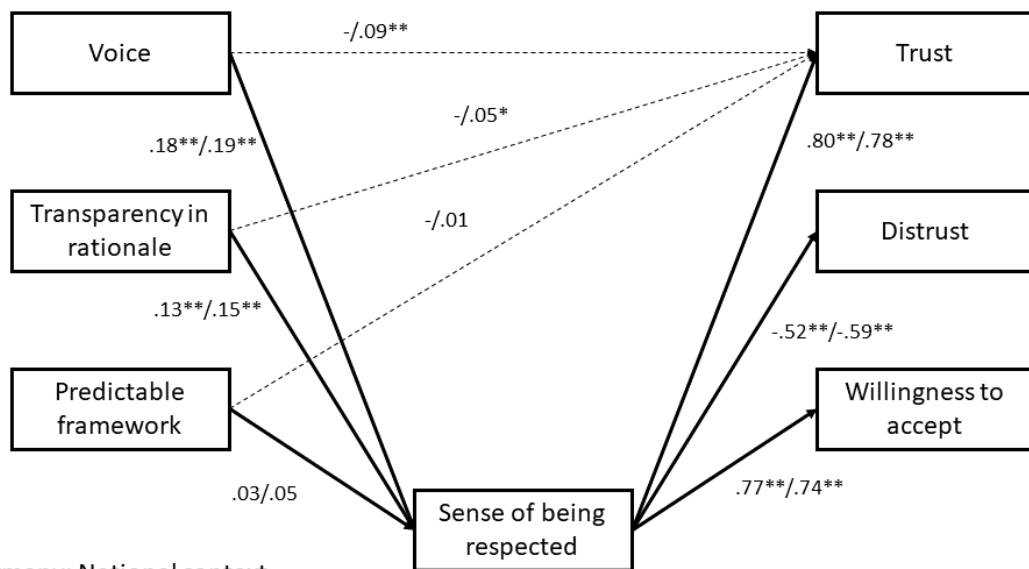
Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 18.53, df = 9, p = 0.03; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.01
Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 7.34, df = 6, p = 0.29; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.02; SRMR = 0.01

Germany: Everyday context
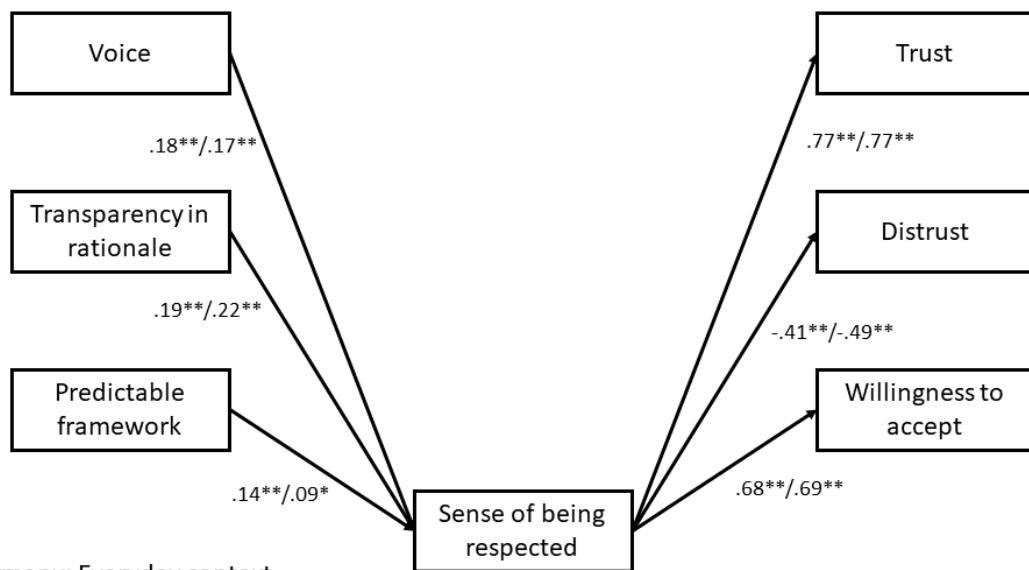
Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 4.26, df = 9, p = 0.89; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.02; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.01
Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 3.25, df = 9, p = 0.95; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.02; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.01

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Italy: National context
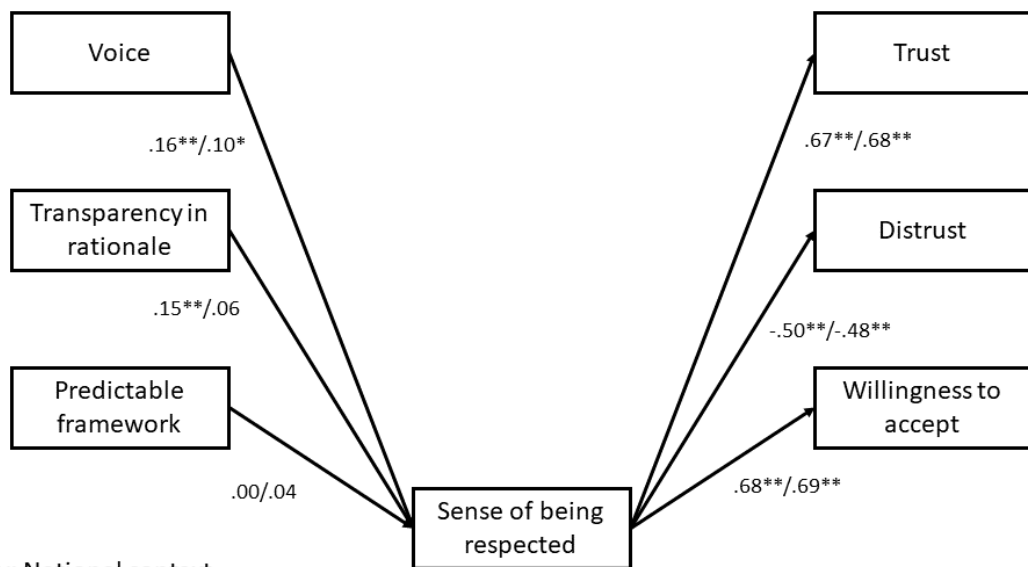
Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 12.63, df = 9, p = 0.18; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.03; SRMR = 0.01
Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 14.53, df = 9, p = 0.10; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.02

Italy: Everyday context

Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 20.82, df = 9, p = 0.01; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.02
Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 19.65, df = 9, p = 0.02; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.02

Serbia: National context

Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 20.08, df = 9, p = 0.02; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.02
Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 17.91, df = 9, p = 0.04; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.02

Serbia: Everyday context

Fit (citizen voice): χ2 = 6.12, df = 6, p = 0.41; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.01; SRMR = 0.01
Fit (expert voice): χ2 = 1.48, df = 3, p = 0.69; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.00

Note. Standardised regression coefficients (citizen/expert voice) are presented. Residual correlations between outcome variables and effects of control variables (gender, generalised interpersonal trust, and trust in government) on the mediator and the outcomes are not shown.

In Czechia, an identical pattern was revealed in both contexts. All three predictors had significant small to medium effects on respect, which, in turn, had large effects on all three outcomes (all indirect effects being significant). The effects on distrust and willingness to accept were fully mediated by respect. The effects on trust were only partially mediated, but the remaining direct effects, not mediated by respect, were generally very small.

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In Germany, small to medium effects of voice and transparency in rationale on respect were found in both contexts, while predictable framework had an effect only in the everyday context. At the same time, respect was strongly related to all dependent variables (so all indirect effects were significant except for those of predictable framework in the national context). The mediation was full in the everyday context and almost full in the national context (where occasional small direct effects on trust appeared).

In Italy, we found small to medium effects of voice and partly of transparency in rationale on respect, while predictable framework seemed to be a negligible predictor. Respect, in turn, predicted all three outcomes (indirect effects were significant whenever there was a significant effect on respect). Full mediation models were adequate for both contexts.

In Serbia, the predictors had small to medium effects on respect (the effect of predictable framework being very limited in the national context), which had large effects on trust and willingness to accept, and a medium effect on distrust (with all indirect effects being significant except for that of predictable framework in the national context). The mediation was full in the national context, while there were some rather small remaining direct effects on trust and distrust in the everyday context.

Overall, relatively consistent effects of both types of voice (citizens and experts), and transparency in rationale on the sense of being respected, were replicated across different countries and contexts. The effects of predictable framework on respect were less pronounced, and appeared only occasionally. At the same time, the sense of being respected by authorities was closely related to greater trust, smaller distrust, and greater willingness to accept the authoritative decision. Full mediations or partial mediations with only negligible direct effects were typically present, which suggested that feeling respected served as a key mechanism explaining the impact of studied aspects of authorities' behaviour on trust, distrust, and willingness to accept.

RQ4: Moderation of experimental conditions by age

Although we tested age moderation for all outcome variables, the clearest results were obtained for trust (results for distrust and willingness to accept were in the same direction, but less pronounced). Therefore, to make the report more succinct, only the analyses with trust as an outcome variable are presented.

We started by testing whether individual experimental conditions had different effects for different age groups. Age group was added as a fixed factor to the previous models (used to investigate RQ1) and its interactions with voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework were assessed. Table 10.7 shows all significant interactions with age and their directions.

Table 10.7. Effects of individual experimental conditions by age

		Voice				Transparency in rationale				Predictable framework			
		11-12	14-15	18-19	30-50	11-12	14-15	18-19	30-50	11-12	14-15	18-19	30-50
National context	Czechia	.01	.02	.06	.03	.01	.02	.06	.03	-	-	-	-
	Germany	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Italy	.01	.03	.00	.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Serbia	.00	.01	.04	.04	.00	.00	.04	.04	-	-	-	-
Everyday context	Czechia	-	-	-	-	.00	.01	.03	.04	-	-	-	-
	Germany	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.01	.00	.00	.02
	Italy	-	-	-	-	.01	.01	.00	.00	-	-	-	-
	Serbia	-	-	-	-	.00	.01	.02	.03	-	-	-	-

Note. If numbers are reported (η^2), the moderation by age is statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Our results revealed that no age effect was replicated across all contexts and countries. The most common interaction was with transparency in rationale, which was significant in five (out of eight) models. The effect of transparency on trust clearly increased with age, in both contexts, in Serbia and Czechia (with the small exception of Czech adults in the national context, where the effect was clear only from early to late adolescence). The same interaction was also significant in Italy, but the effects were very small and in the opposite direction. All interaction effects between transparency and age are displayed in Figure 10.7.

Figure 10.7. Interaction between transparency in rationale and age

253
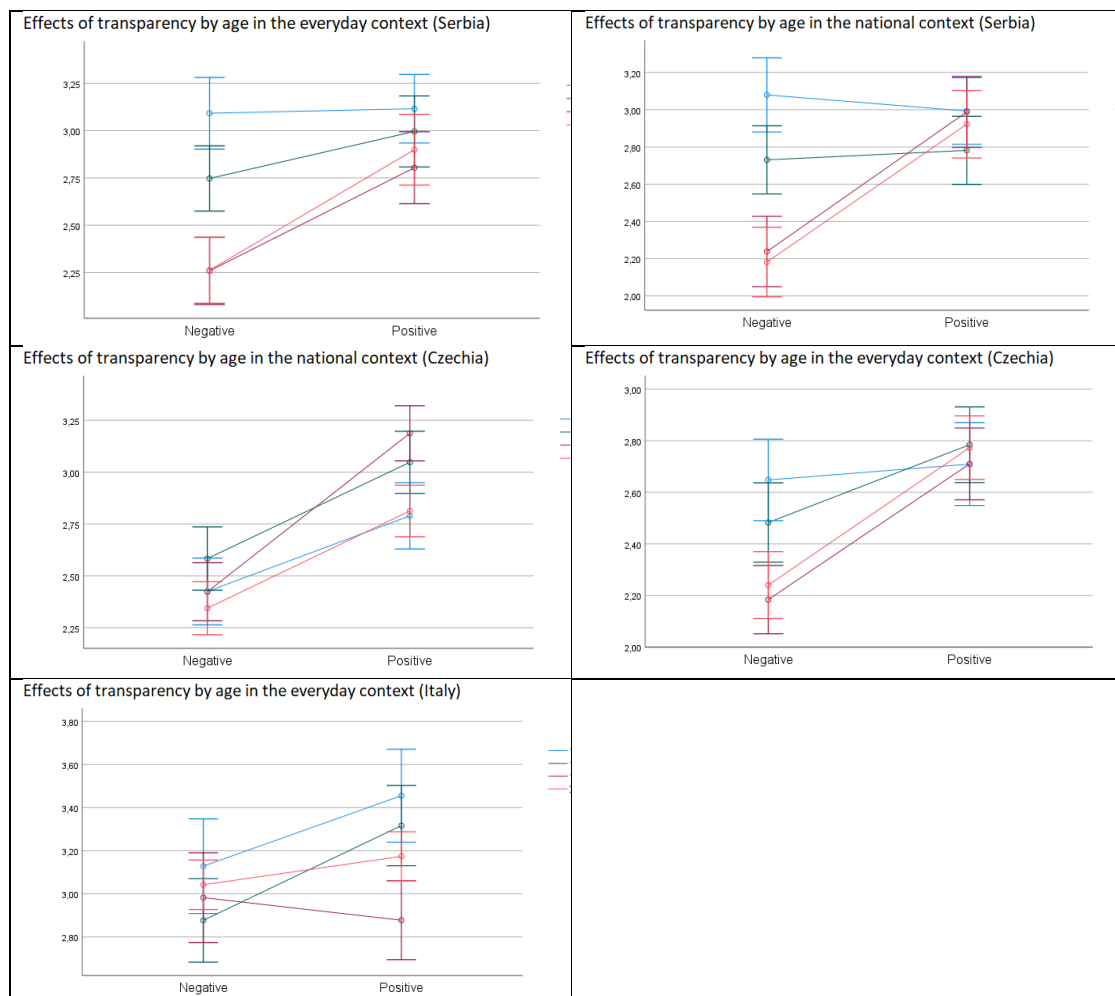
Other significant interaction patterns were less consistent (Figure 10.8). The effect of voice in the national context increased with age in Serbia and Czechia (in Czechia, it was more pronounced in late adolescence than adulthood). Once again, the opposite effect was observed in Italy. In addition, one isolated interaction between age and predictable framework was present.
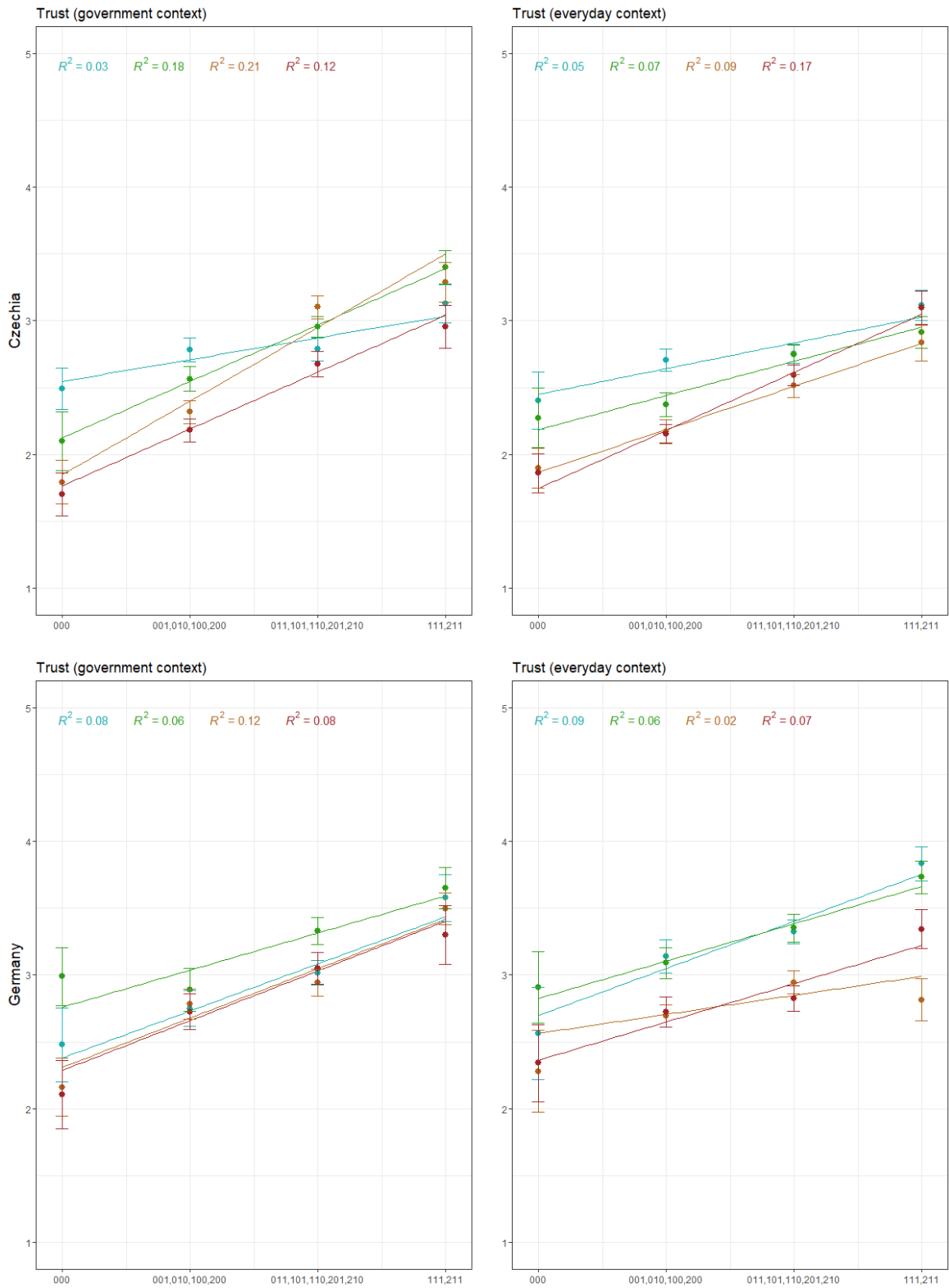
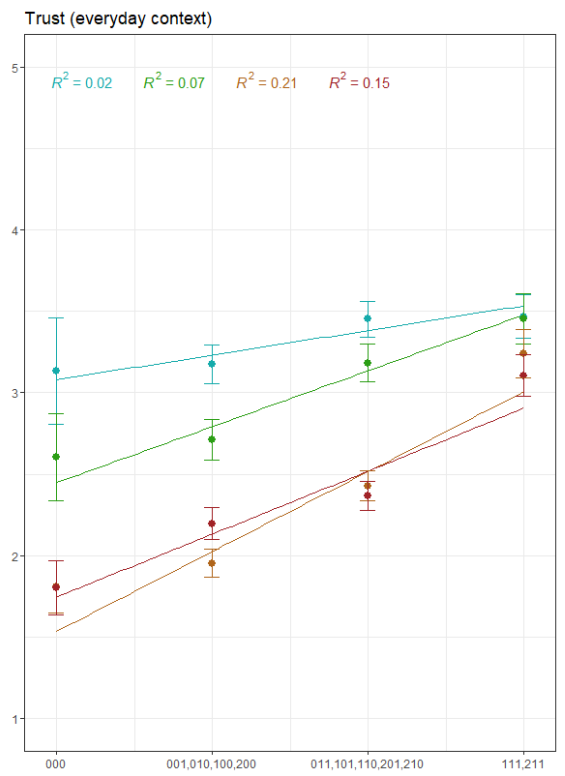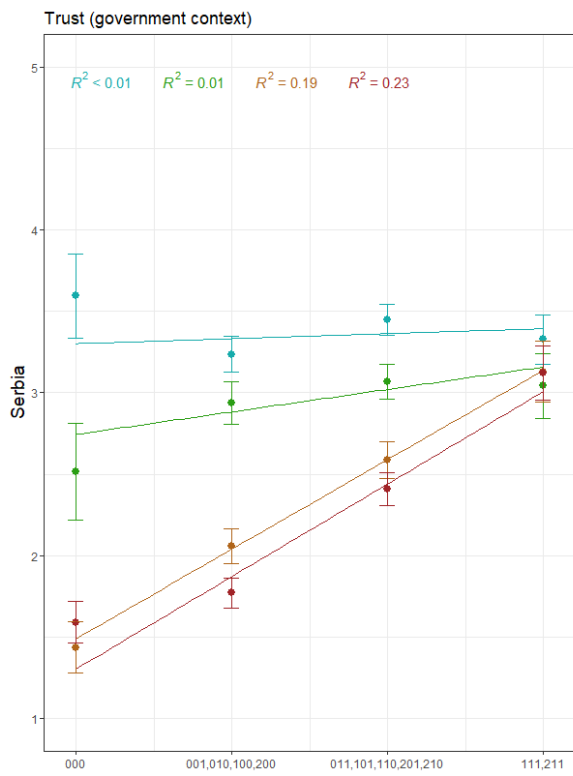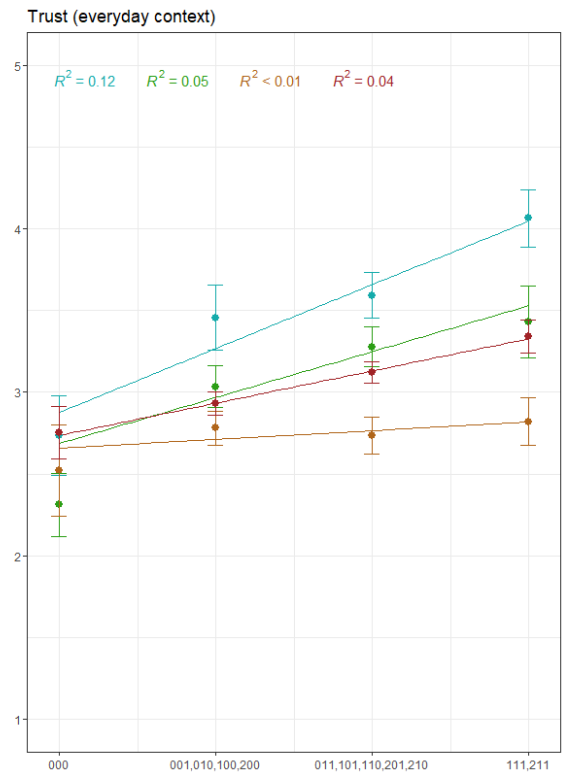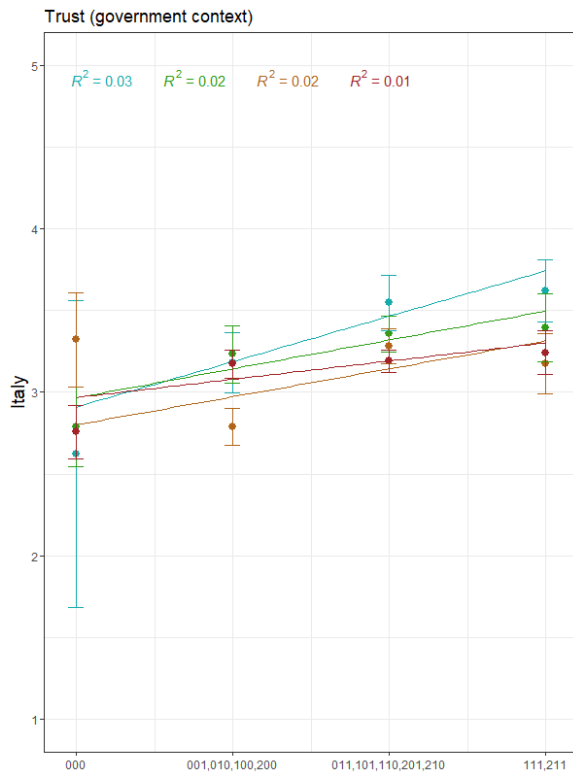Figure 10.8. Interaction between voice or predictable framework and age
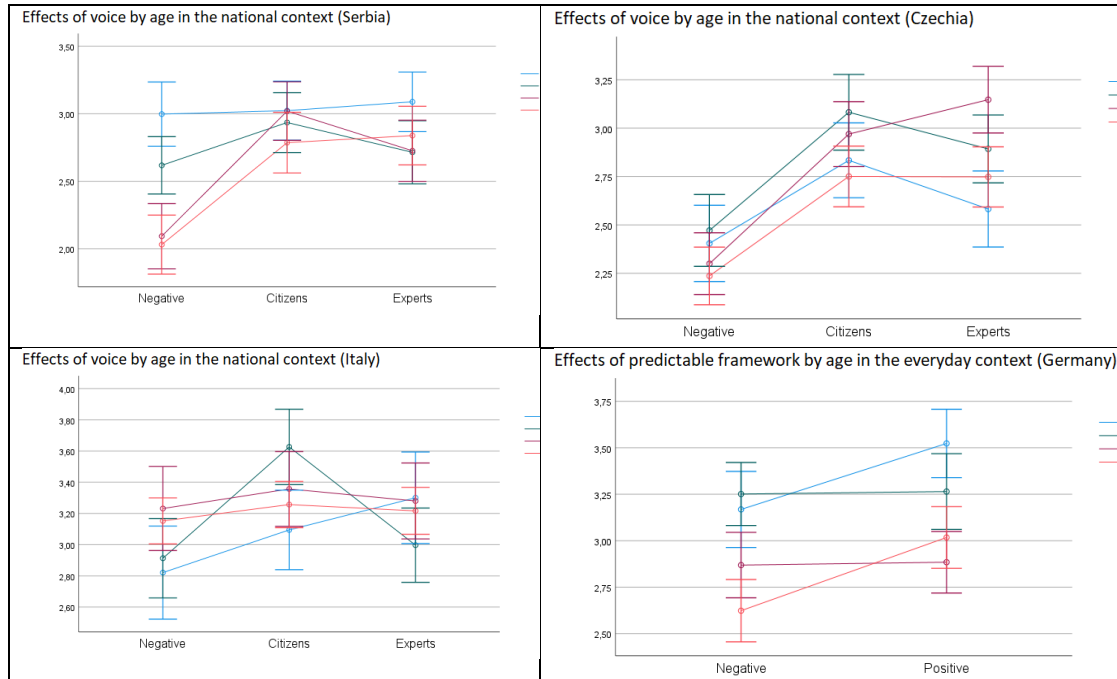
In the second step, we tested whether the overall trends of the experimental conditions differed by age. Similar to the previous analysis, our results showed no age effect was replicated across all contexts and countries. The age differences were non-significant for the national and everyday contexts in Germany and Italy. In Italy, the differences were observable on the plots (see Figure 10.9), but this could be due to random variance as the regression analysis showed no significant interactions.

Nevertheless, the age differences in trends were significant in Czechia and Serbia. In both countries, the effects of age on experimental trends were similar. The experimental conditions' trend decreased with age, due to the fact that younger people were less affected by the negative conditions. This could be best seen in the all-negative condition (000) in Figure 10.9. While the older participants were more affected by this condition and had lower trust means, the younger ones from Czechia and Serbia were less affected and had higher means. This discrepancy then converged to similar means in the all-positive condition. These effects were present for both the national and everyday contexts, and ranged from moderate ($\beta_{Serbia(E)} = 0.23$, $\beta_{Czechia(N)} = 0.26$, $\beta_{Czechia(E)} = 0.29$) to large ($\beta_{Serbia(N)} = 0.55$).

Figure 10.9. Trends of experimental conditions in the national and everyday context by age

Trust (government context) — Italy

Trust (everyday context) — Italy

Trust (government context) — Serbia

Trust (everyday context) — Serbia

4. Conclusions

The results of the survey-based experiments, conducted in four countries and focusing on two distinct contexts, suggested the effectiveness of our experimental manipulation. Participants differentiated between the twelve variants of the vignette and responded to the presence or absence of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework in the expected direction. The effect on trust was evident in all countries and contexts, and the effects on distrust and willingness to accept in almost all of them.

All three aspects of authorities' behaviour had their unique positive effects on our outcome variables. At least for trust, the positive impacts of voice, transparency in rationale, and predicable framework were replicated with no exception across all countries and contexts. Thus, decision-making situations in which authorities consulted their decision with other actors (citizens or experts) yielded more positive responses among the participants than when the authorities decided by themselves. We also found a consistent pattern according to which the citizen and the expert voices had positive effects of a similar size, with none of them being superior to the other. In addition, trust and other outcomes were further improved when the authorities were transparent about information, facts, and reasons behind their decision-making. This effect of transparency had a comparable size to the effect of voice. Finally, the perceptions of the authorities were more positive when they provided a predictable framework and information on the implementation of the decision-making outcomes. However, this latter effect appeared to be somewhat less pronounced and less universal than the effects of voice and transparency.

The effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework were found to be additive. This means that the presence or absence of even a single aspect (e.g., non-transparency versus transparency) made a difference in participants' trust, distrust, or willingness to accept. Thus, participants did not view the decision-making situations in an all-or-nothing manner; that is, not all aspects of authorities' behaviour needed to be positive to observe positive changes in participants' perceptions. Instead, participants' responses to the presented situations were more nuanced, and closely reflected the number of positive versus negative aspects of authorities' behaviour. This pattern was almost universally replicated across countries, contexts, and outcome variables.

Further, we identified the sense of being respected (as a citizen, a student, or an employee) as the key psychological mechanism explaining the positive effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework. When the authorities consulted their decision-making with citizens or experts, were transparent about information, facts, and reasons, or provided some predictable framework, people felt more respected. This sense of respect was, in turn, closely related to higher levels of trust, a greater willingness to accept, and lower levels distrust. Most common across the countries and contexts was that a greater sense of respect sufficiently explained the complete effect of authorities' behaviour. Occasionally, the authorities' behaviour also

yielded effects unrelated to respect (mostly on trust), but these effects tended to be small. Overall, the finding on the mediating role of respect means powerful support for this aspect of the group engagement model.

Our results concerning age must be interpreted only with caution. We found two intriguing trends in our data. First, younger participants seemed to be less affected by transparency in rationale whose impact on trust increased with age. This was consistent with our initial expectation that transparency in rationale represents a rather subtle aspect of authorities' behaviour, and thus tends to be less noticed and appreciated at a younger age. Second, younger participants generally responded less strongly to the absence of positive aspects in authorities' behaviour, so the additive effects of voice, transparency in rationale, and predictable framework were stronger with age. A possible explanation is that younger adolescents are less critical of authorities, which makes them more tolerant of negative aspects of authorities' behaviour.

However, these findings on age differences were replicated only in two out of four countries (Czechia and Serbia), albeit for both contexts. It is likely that the effect of age is further modulated by country-specific contextual factors, such as the educational system, social norms, or political culture. Therefore, our age-related findings should only be viewed as preliminary until future research disentangles how exactly these country-specific factors affect different age cohorts. At the same time, the absence of universal age-related patterns clearly suggests that even young adolescents are able to take into account whether authorities provide people with the voice, transparency in rationale, and a predictable framework. The specific consequences for adolescents' trust seem to depend on a broader context.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that we found no considerable differences between both studied contexts – the national context involving governmental decision-making, and the everyday context involving decision-making by the school or company management. This strongly suggests that, at least to some extent, psychological processes of (dis)trust in authorities share considerable similarities no matter the distance from the authority. Hence, the same processes seem to apply to distal political decision-making, which does not involve any personal interactions with the authority, and to proximal contexts where the relationships with the authorities are more direct and personal. Although this is not meant to imply that the contextual differences are irrelevant (indeed, they might be crucial in many cases), the study of general processes affecting (dis)trust in authorities seems to be comparably relevant based on our results.

When interpreting our findings, it must be borne in mind that they are all based on the vignette experiments, and thus concern people's responses to short textual descriptions of preselected hypothetical situations. It is also necessary to consider that the scope of studied countries, decision-making contexts, and issues (e.g., the anti-pandemic measures) is inevitably limited. Although the results provide numerous valuable insights into the (dis)trust-building processes, their validity must be further investigated using different methodologies and more realistic settings.

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11. Conclusion and Summary of the Main Findings

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The final chapter of this report integrates the main findings of the whole Work Package 5, combining the qualitative findings from the focus groups and the quantitative findings from the survey-based experiment, to explore the similarities and differences in conceptualisations and sources of (dis)trust across countries and age groups. To synthesise the qualitative results from the national reports, we first created a table with all constructed themes and their respective summaries. We proceeded with systematically coding the similarities in theme summaries across countries. After the similarities were coded, we checked them against the national reports to ensure accuracy.

We first introduce the conceptualisations of (dis)trust, drawing on the qualitative findings. Then we combine the qualitative and quantitative results to elaborate on the sources of (dis)trust and the age differences, capturing the developmental aspect of (dis)trust.

1. Conceptualisations of (dis)trust

Trust and distrust as coexisting concepts: The ideal of moderate trust

Trust and distrust were conceptualised as predominantly distinct constructs by participants across all studied countries. Findings from Czechia, Germany and Denmark show similarity in participants explicitly describing their understanding of trust and distrust as separate, yet coexisting concepts. In other countries, the perception of trust and distrust as two phenomena is more implicit, captured by participants discussing trust and distrust separately, rather than assimilating the absence of trust with distrust. Aptly captured in the Danish report, a myriad of different (dis)trust combinations and levels is possible.

Findings from Czechia and Germany show a phenomenon that can be likened to a trust vacuum. The trust vacuum represents a state of absence of both trust and distrust. The individual is neither trusting nor distrusting due to a lack of sources for trust and distrust (e.g., due to not knowing the person very well), or a lack of interest (e.g., in politics in general).

Importantly, moderate trust – when people do not trust blindly, but also are not a priori and unyieldingly distrusting – was depicted as the ideal to strive for by the majority of participants in Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Poland, and Serbia. The Czech, Serbian, Greek, and Danish participants particularly emphasised the salience of critical

thinking, actively seeking information, and autonomous decision-making about the extent to which other people and the governments can be trusted. For Czech and Serbian participants, seeing the shared value in critical thinking increased their trust towards others. In Italy, participants acknowledged that blind trust impedes critical thinking, whereas distrust can stimulate it. However, the Italian participants were also particularly wary of the negative impact of excessive criticism tied to a generally highly distrustful stance. Blind, unconditional trust (e.g., uncritically, mindlessly following every measure that the governance issues) and categorical distrust (e.g., immediately rejecting virtually all decisions made by the government) were generally appraised as dangerous, and were often discussed with open disdain across all countries.

Many respondents also remarked that while they consider access to diverse sources of information crucial for developing and sustaining moderate trust, the ease and speed with which information can be spread and accessed in today's world, particularly through the Internet, can lead to information overload, as well as the dissemination of unverified information and disinformation. As a result, blind distrust emerges, meaning people uncritically distrust, which is connected to similar perils of blind trust. A few of our participants themselves espoused common disinformation (e.g., about the origin or severity of the virus), or even fully-fledged conspiracy theories.

General and contextual (dis)trust

The theme of general (dis)trust reflects the notion of the participants that society would not be able to function without a necessary level of general trust in others. Participants from Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Poland, and Serbia espoused this sentiment. Without some level of trust in other people, daily functioning (e.g., getting groceries or collaborating with colleagues) would be impossible or extremely difficult. The Danish participants also expounded that high general trust in others is characteristic of Danish society as a whole. A general, unconditional trust in certain people (typically parents) and institutions was also mentioned. Finally, general trust can be conceptualised as a general tendency akin to a personality trait. On the other hand, there is also a general tendency to distrust, which can lead to loneliness and social isolation. These findings indicate the potential negative consequences of extreme distrust on well-being.

Complementary to the general tendency to (dis)trust, the participants recognised that in addition to general (dis)trusting tendencies, (dis)trust takes on various forms depending on context. Relatedly, the processes of trust building, or trust deterioration are also contextually dependent. This acknowledgement was more or less explicitly present in all countries. For example, trust in work colleagues and trust in family members are not interchangeable and draw on slightly different sources of trust due to the differences in the nature of these relationships. In addition, trust and distrust toward the same subject (e.g., a person or an institution) can thus coexist. For instance, a person can trust their colleague in the workplace setting but distrust the same colleague in the context of friendship.

Notably, the contextual specifics of the situation itself impact trust and the trust-building process. To illustrate, the novelty and a relative lack of information about Covid-19 at the beginning of the pandemic led many respondents across countries to strongly trust the authorities (e.g., the government, the task force or the epidemiologists). Linking this finding to the importance of moderate distrust mentioned above, many respondents noted that this particular context strongly favoured blind trust and hindered moderate trust, as information was scarce at the time.

2. Sources of (dis)trust in authorities and interpersonal (dis)trust

Knowledgeability and competency

Participants across all countries unanimously viewed knowledgeability, expertise, and perceived competency as essential sources of trust, particularly trust in authorities. Correspondingly, perceived lack of knowledge and competency led to distrust. It is important to emphasise that the participants generally did not favour appeals to authority, e.g., from the governance or experts themselves. They were, in fact, quite cautious about decisions that relied heavily on arguments from authorities or experts in the field (e.g., epidemiology). The respondents called for governmental decisions based on rational, factual, logical, and scientifically-sound arguments, ideally supported by empirical evidence, not in contradiction with common sense, and well-explained to the general public.

In the context of the pandemic, justifications of the measures based on expert opinions were temporarily efficient at the beginning when there was very little information or other sources about the virus. The participants concluded that the expert opinions were, even though imperfect, the most optimal choice at the time, given the circumstances. They were also initially generally more lenient and accepting, given the suddenness and novelty of the situation. With time and a surge in available information, the citizens increasingly scrutinised the rationale behind the implementation or changes in restrictions, and became especially sensitive to unsubstantiated anti-Covid measures. For instance, basing a new anti-Covid measure solely on the opinion of a reputable expert was acceptable during the first wave of the pandemic, but was deemed quite questionable and problematic in the subsequent waves.

The respondents also found it difficult to accept that even the experts or science, in general, can be fallible (e.g., a widely propagated measure proved rather ineffective later on). The disappointment was enhanced by the fact that most authorities presented the measures with high certainty, which initially bolstered trust, but turned into a slippery slope when the restrictions were less efficient than was purported. It is, however, also important to note that in some countries, the experts discredited themselves throughout the pandemic, for example, due to suspicions that they might be profiting from the pandemic. Respondents across countries were generally sensitive to any signs of governance or task force having financial gain from the situation, which indicates

the utmost importance of avoiding and managing potential or perceived conflicts of interest.

Our quantitative findings further showed that trust is undermined when authorities do not consult their decisions with other actors. We found a consistent pattern across multiple countries and contexts, suggesting that involving citizens' views in the decision-making process yields effects on trust that have the same impact as those involving experts. Although the legitimacy of citizens' and experts' voices likely stems from different bases, people seem to generally appreciate it when authorities do not decide by themselves, but are more inclusive.

Regarding country specifics, in this case Serbian participants, the perceived incompetence of the healthcare workers (due to, e.g., perceived overt focus on Covid-19 patients, poor organisation, and unprofessionalism) led to distrust in the whole healthcare system, including health institutions. Polish participants viewed the Covid-19 pandemic as a crash test for citizens' trust in institutions. Participants in Czechia were particularly concerned with the meaningfulness of the measures.

While knowledgeability and competency were not as cardinal for interpersonal trust as trust in authorities, participants from all countries were more inclined to trust significant others (e.g., relatives or close friends) and colleagues they deemed well-informed, wise, and capable. Aptly termed as a history of knowledge in the Serbian report, commonly receiving good, reliable information and sensible advice from a particular person proved especially important for interpersonal trust based on knowledge and competence.

Predictability, transparency, and consistency

Predictability, transparency, and consistency play an important, non-negligible role in building and sustaining trust. Correspondingly, unpredictable actions, ambiguity, and inconsistency contribute to distrust. These factors were pertinent to both interpersonal (dis)trust and (dis)trust in authorities. However, it is important to note that Serbian participants discussed the importance of consistency primarily in relation to trust in authorities rather than interpersonal trust. In Germany, adult participants talked about predictability more in terms of institutional than interpersonal trust. Participants generally agreed that the predictability of governmental steps facilitates trust in authorities because people know what they can expect and feel the coveted certainty and security.

The pandemic proved to be an upheaval in many aspects of most people's lives, disrupting the established predictable framework in most countries. However, the governments were relatively predictable and consistent in their decision-making throughout most of the first wave of the pandemic. As the pandemic persisted, the changes in restrictions became increasingly unpredictable and inconsistent. Participants in the studied countries had to cope with everchanging information and measures to a vary-

ing, but in all cases, non-negligible extent. Citizens considered unpredictability and in-consistency in how the restrictions were implemented and revoked as significant sources of distrust toward the anti-Covid measures, and even the overall governance.

The importance of predictability and transparency was also corroborated in our quan-titative findings, where (not) being transparent and (not) providing a predictable framework for people shaped their trust and distrust. The effects were observed at both the national level (in relation to hypothetical anti-pandemic measures) and the level of everyday interactions at school or the workplace. With respect to transpar-ency, we tested and confirmed the effect of transparency in rationale, which means that authorities are explicit about the reasons and facts underlying their decision-mak-ing.

Qualitative research participants also noticed that even the experts often disagreed among themselves, or that different institutions and authorities (e.g., government members and scientists) promoted contradictory information. For example, the task force in Serbia could not agree on what information to present to the public, and vari-ous representatives officially kept sharing conflicting information. Italian and Polish participants criticised policies that directly contradicted one another, and ascribed the inconsistency to a lack of scientific rationale behind the measures. Contradictory state-ments and policies proved to be a major source of distrust in authorities.

Knowing what to expect from the other person, consistent attitudes and behaviours, and congruence between words and actions build trust in interpersonal relationships. In a similar way to trust in authorities, predictability and consistency make not only institutions, but also specific people more trustworthy. Greek participants linked inter-personal trust based on predictability to knowing someone for a long time, as it usually implies knowing the person well, and thus being able to anticipate their actions.

Experience-based (dis)trust

Experience-based (dis)trust was prevalent in all studied countries. Specific experiences were similarly relevant for developing (dis)trust in authorities and close others. How-ever, Czech, Polish, and Serbian respondents discussed the role of particular experi-ences more extensively in relation to interpersonal trust than trust in authorities. Pos-itive experiences of honesty, reliability, and confidentiality, and the absence of adverse experiences, especially hurtful ones, encouraged trust. Italians held the act of accept-ing responsibility in high regard, as well. Negative experiences that generated distrust encompassed betrayals, disappointments, dishonesty, and unreliability, including in-consistency.

In terms of trust in governance and institutions during the pandemic, participants were able to point to critical experiences that undermined trust and increased distrust. For example, establishing a politicised task force and renewed curfews immediately after parliamentary elections were particularly momentous in Serbia. In Czechia, the fre-quent changes of health ministers and the hypocritical behaviour of one particular

health minister, who was also a prominent epidemiologist and violated the restrictions that he imposed, disrupted citizens' trust and fostered distrust. Danish citizens extensively discussed the problematic extermination of mink, which turned out to be illegal and unconstitutional later on. Similarly, critical positive experiences, such as the well managed start of the pandemic, especially in comparison to other neighbouring countries, increased trust and prevented distrust. The impact of these critical negative and positive experiences was also reflected in public polls, or even mobility data. For example, the mobility of citizens in Serbia increased after the government attempted to reintroduce curfews immediately after Election Day. On the other hand, the successfully handled start of the pandemic in Greece led to notable increases in citizens' trust in the government, the Prime Minister, and scientists.

This qualitative finding should be viewed in light of our quantitative results, according to which different negative and positive aspects of authorities' behaviour add up to produce their effects on trust and distrust. Participants in our study did not evaluate authorities' behaviour in a binary manner. The effects of unique positive aspects of authorities' behaviour on participants' perceptions were evident even if some other aspects were negative. At the same time, the presence of negative aspects in otherwise positive overall behaviour mattered and decreased participants' trust. Although this finding does not rule out the potentially pivotal role of critical trust-relevant experiences, it suggests that trust can also be formed in a more cumulative way.

Qualitative participants agreed that salient life experiences affect people's general propensity to (dis)trust, and described the process of the generalisation of distrust from powerful negative experiences with particular people or institutions to general distrust towards others, authorities, or even society as a whole. The tendency to (dis)trust then impacts how the person approaches meeting new people or authorities, indicating a reciprocal relationship between general (dis)trust and life experiences.

Many participants, especially in Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Poland, and Serbia, emphasised the aspect of time in building trust through life experiences. The level of (dis)trust in a specific person or institution undergoes constant modification through ongoing experiences with them. Participants often placed the highest level of trust in people they had known for a long time, and with whom they generally had mainly positive experiences and few to no negative experiences.

Reciprocity and respect

While reciprocity pertained to interpersonal (dis)trust in general, it was nonetheless more prominent in interpersonal relationships than institutional ones. The respondents expounded on several aspects of reciprocity in relation to (dis)trust. Firstly, there was a general expectation that trust should be mutual, fittingly likened to a social contract in the German report. Participants strongly anticipated that their trust be reciprocated. Analogously, they tended to trust people who trusted them. Secondly, reciprocal confiding in each other with concerns and problems, mutual help and support, mainly through hardships, and joint positive moments led to trust. Thirdly, the trustor

and the trustee mutually hold positive expectations of the intentions and behaviour of one another in terms of reliability and confidentiality. Finally, shared core values, worldviews, or interests were another reciprocal component of trust.

Regarding (dis)trust in authorities, the relationships between citizens and authorities are considered formal. Therefore, people do not hold as strong expectations of reciprocal trust as in interpersonal relationships. However, even under these circumstances, (dis)trust is not unequivocally one-sided. For instance, the younger age groups in Denmark cited the distrust they experienced from the government, who blamed them for not complying with the anti-Covid measures and worsening the incidence of Covid-19 cases, as one of the reasons for distrusting authorities during the pandemic. Comparably, some Greek respondents started distrusting the governance upon concluding that the authorities imposed strict measures because they distrusted the citizens.

In a similar vein, our quantitative results suggested an essential role of respectful treatment in the process of building trust in authorities. When the authority observes the above-mentioned sources of trust (e.g., behaves predictably or transparently), it makes people feel respected as valuable members of their groups or society, in general. The sense of being respected, in turn, contributes to trust in the authority and a willingness to accept its rules or decisions. On the contrary, by acting unpredictably, not being transparent, etc., authorities communicate their lack of respect for people. Consequently, people can lose their trust or develop overt distrust as their psychological bond to the authority becomes weakened.

Less prevalent themes

Some Italian, Serbian, and Polish respondents interpreted **trust and distrust as based on the outcomes** of the actions of the institutions or people. Italian respondents emphasised the instrumental function of trust and the importance of concrete, tangible results. While Polish participants were disappointed by the implemented government restrictions, which had negative consequences for trust in authorities, participants in Serbia considered the measures as manipulated by the ruling party, and the background of the crisis was doubted. Two similar themes related to **(dis)trust as a form of protection** appeared in the German and Danish samples. Trust can be perceived as vulnerability, and distrust can serve as a form of protection (from hurt, disappointments, etc.). Lastly, again in Germany and Denmark, there was a similar theme highlighting the significance of **trust, norms, morality and values**. In Denmark, the focus was on individuals expressing their social indignation based on their personal values, deeming others' behaviour as morally wrong or unfair, particularly in trust-based situations where emotions are invested. In contrast, German participants emphasised people's beliefs about the moral conditions and similar values that are necessary for building trust in others.

3. Age differences

Despite the presence of numerous similarities observed across all age groups (such as the importance of predictability, one's own judgment, information, knowledge, honesty, etc.), there were also notable differences among age groups. This chapter will shift attention toward the age differences that arose.

In examining the age differences across the seven countries, it becomes evident that there are several similarities worth noting. The youngest participants (11-12) in all countries mentioned the importance of keeping secrets as a source of trust, and revealing secrets or betrayals as a source of distrust. Some of them valued honesty, keeping promises, and sharing experiences and attitudes. They trusted people they could confide in. Greek participants highlighted knowing someone well before trusting them. In some countries, the youngest age group was less critical and suspicious of authorities. However, Czech participants noticed the lack of explanation of the measures and found some meaningless. Compared to the older interviewees, in most countries, young participants did not discuss the importance of experts and the wider impact of (dis)trust on society. Nevertheless, Danish participants showed a positive attitude towards others, emphasising the significance of upholding social order and minimising conflicts.

Trusting parents was particular to the younger age groups. In some countries, parents were mentioned as important figures in interpersonal trust and as a source of information during pandemics. Compared to older interviewees, younger interviewees were influenced by their parents or the opinions of other close adults. Confidentiality was also important for the 14-15 age group, and was occasionally mentioned by older adolescents, too. Reciprocity in trust was in some countries important for adolescents and in others for all age groups. Mainly the Greek and Polish adolescents emphasised the importance of time in trust building; in Greece, time was perceived as the test of whether the relationship would stand, while Polish participants put emphasis on the significance of shared experiences and the importance of frequency of interactions. Furthermore, Polish and Czech younger interviewees had a tendency to label people as "bad" or "good", and (dis)trusted accordingly.

Finally, in some countries, the two younger age groups were described as more trustful and less critical regarding institutional trust, which, as written in the Greek report, could be influenced by the limited experience of younger adolescents with politics. Some of these trends could also be observed in our quantitative findings, although they were limited only to Czechia and Serbia, and not present in two other countries. Specifically, trust among younger age cohorts (early and middle adolescents) seemed to be less affected, compared to older cohorts, by an increasing number of negative aspects in authorities' behaviour. At the same time, younger participants in our quantitative data from Czechia and Serbia were less affected by authorities' transparency, which suggests their lower concern over this source of trust. On the other hand, especially in German, Danish, and Italian qualitative data, the 14-15 age group was more perceptive to the competence of institutions, and rational and scientifically founded

decisions were seen as a source of trust. A few younger interviewees talked about blind trust as problematic.

With increasing age, cognitive development, and more experience, the oldest adolescent group (18-19) described a broader vision of the world, was more sceptical (Denmark), valued autonomous decisions and critical thinking (Serbia), looked up to experts and science (e.g., Poland and Germany). Interestingly, Italian interviewees brought up an instrumental view of (dis)trust, and paid attention to concrete outcomes to assess trustworthiness. Several older interviewees mentioned shared values as a crucial source of trust. The interviewees of the oldest age group (30+) often used experience as a reference when speaking of (dis)trust or forming an opinion. Danish interviewees perceived experience as protective. Czech participants articulated a higher tolerance for mistakes. Polish interviewees expressed a relatively lower level of criticism towards the government's actions, often citing the unprecedented situation as a contributing factor. A prevailing characteristic that was shared among the majority of the countries was the importance of experts and empirical reasoning. Furthermore, the older interviewees claimed to use more sources of media, weighing alternatives and a variety of information sources to make a decision, as was emphasised in the German data. In Poland, economic drawbacks of not trusting the right people were also mentioned.