

## **A MULTIFACETED PERSPECTIVE ON TRUST AMID STUDENTS: FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL**

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### **Abstract:**

*Research background:* Scholars used to equate trust and distrust with a person's statement of trust in the intentions and motivations of others. Other studies focused on trustor conduct based on favorable expectations about a trustee's course of action. Starting from these premises, the present article aims to discuss the role of awareness and the perception of trust among students, from a multifaceted perspective, namely from the individual (i.e., representatives) to the institutional level. There is a growing awareness of the crucial role that trust plays in every aspect of life. Whether we are talking about everyday life or considering the educational process or making decisions, trust is an essential concept for the success of any type of adapting process. Amid the pandemic crisis (Covid-19), trust (in the authorities, in the messages they sent, in specialists' opinions, in the political leaders) has often made the difference between life and death. The trustor can rest assured that their expectations will be fulfilled based on confidence in the other party's benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. Also, in the post-truth period, trust seems to matter less and less. In this context, the citizen's trust in public authorities and their own elected parliament is to a low level.

*Purpose of the article:* The study aims to explore the role that trust has in the relationship with relatives and institutions.

*Methods:* An online survey among the students from the University Center of Bacau, Romania (N=633) was conducted in November 2021. The survey aimed to highlight the role that trust plays in forming opinions among students about the relationship with colleagues, friends, and family, but also how this relates to various state authorities, such as: parliament, government, mass media, NGOs, health system, universities, specialists, army.

*Findings & Value added:* The findings indicated that trust could be influenced by the gender. Furthermore, there is a significant link between people with a high level of trust in the institutions and in the representatives of the institutions.

**Keywords:** trust, interpersonal relation, state institutions, social cohesion, student's perception

**JEL Classification:** I23; I31

## **1. Introduction**

Scholars disagree on the definition of trust, its primary qualities, and methods of development, and there is a wide range of theoretical frameworks for its study in the literature. Furthermore, trust is a multi-disciplinary notion that is examined by economists, sociologists, managers, political scientists, and administrators. Each profession emphasizes different aspects of trust and its drivers, making the study more intricate and harder to understand. To disaggregate trust and understand its roots, some academics try to use an integrated framework of analysis. According to some academics, trust occurs at several societal levels (micro, meso, and macro), which might explain the wide range of trust definitions.

Scholars used to equate trust and distrust with a person's statement of trust in the intentions and motivations of others (Lewicki et al., 1998). On the other hand, other studies focused on trustor conduct based on favorable expectations about a trustee's course of action (Mayer et al., 1995). However, such a categorization is excessively narrow since it does not discriminate between the many mechanisms that might lead to trust formation or the various types of processes that can lead to trust formation. It is unclear if others' intentions or expectations are based on a rational foundation or are the outcome of a psychological process based on this concept.

## **2. Literature review**

The literature on trust and its many manifestations is extensive. It could be divided into categories based on the theoretical framework that underpins trust development. It also can be traced the rational decision, institutional, psychological, and reflective viewpoints.

The dominance of reason in trust building processes occur within cognitive functions and are based on an appraisal of others' trustworthiness. It is assumed by rational choice mechanisms. On the other hand, psychological mechanisms are based on emotions and reflexes, and are mostly affective in nature, as trust is developed based on a positive affect towards the object of trust. While institutional level emphasizes the importance of formal and informal institutions that arose from the constraints of dominant cultural ideology and history, the reflexive mechanisms are viewed as a leap of faith that occurs because of engagement and suspension and is predicated on the trustee's future trustworthiness.

Chan, To, and Chan (2006) define social cohesion as a situation characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that include trust, a sense of belonging, and a willingness to take part and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations. In this context, the importance of trust in social cohesiveness and social capital cannot be overstated (Berman and Phillips 2012; Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000). Based on that, Sabel (1993) described trust as "the mutual belief that neither party will take advantage of the weakness of the other."

As a result, people must rely on others in a variety of ways to do their tasks. Some researchers pointed out that two paradigms of thought had emerged (Tomlinson et al., 2020) and developed in parallel.

The first one is clear in the literature regarding to the operationalization of trust with the most used definitions largely adopting a unidimensional stance. For example, Mayer et al. (1995) define trust as the "willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of a trustee based on the expectation that the trustee will perform a particular action, irrespective of any monitoring or control mechanism". Years later, trust was defined as "accepted risk and vulnerability based on favorable expectations of the intentions or actions of another" (Rousseau et al., 1998). Even the simplest decision is fundamentally founded on the degree of confidence.

Trust, according to this viewpoint, is an essential component of all human connections, including personal relationships, academic education, family life, economic investment, journalism, and medical treatment. Trust is an important notion. As a result, trust might be defined as a collection of actions, such as acting in ways that rely on another (Rousseau et al., 1998), or a belief in the likelihood that a person will behave in a certain circumstance (Robinson, 1996). In certain cases, trust is an abstract mental attitude toward the premise that someone is trustworthy.

Based on those approaches, trust could be imaged as two-face construct, having two important concepts: importance and danger. From one perspective, trust is crucial because it allows individuals to rely on others (for affection, wisdom, and help), especially when we know that no outside force drives them to do so. But and this is also important, trust involves also a risk. The risk that people we trust will not be fully involved. In this situation, what is the reason for trusting them anymore (McAllister, 1995).

Trust is described, at least in social sciences, as key factor that mediates various aspects of human behavior (Camerer, 2003; Fukuyama, 1996; Mitkidis et al., 2013). Definitions of trust vary but a widely accepted one is that it is "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau et al., 1998).

In other words, a person (the trustor) who depends on someone else (the trustee) expects to reduce the negative outcome in a specific situation. So, trust is the attitude someone has towards people who hope will be trustworthy. Therefore, when discussing about trust there is another concept involved (trustworthiness). Those whom we trust will be appreciated as trustworthy. Those who are trustworthy will be granted as being trusted. First, the parties to the relationship (trustee and trustor) must have attitudes toward one another that allow trust to manifest. And second, for trust to be well-grounded, both parties must be trustworthy.

A lot of variables contribute to a country's degree of social trust, which includes both interpersonal and institutional trust. There are two approaches on the factors that influence interpersonal trust (Newton 2013; Algan and Cahuc 2013). Known as the individual-oriented theory, the first approach state that interpersonal trust is an individual property linked to personal characteristics such as personality traits (including morality) and social and demographic characteristics such as age, social status, gender, education, income, and religion. The second one, known as the society-based hypothesis, point that interpersonal trust is a systematic and emergent characteristic of society, rather than a human trait.

Roud and Gausdal (2019) pointed that trust has a critical role to play such as improving coordination, communication, reliability, and learning. Trust is also described as a tendency toward positive expectations regarding the future actions of the other party (Brattström and Bachmann, 2018), deepening in-team reliance.

In this regard, interpersonal trust may be divided into two categories: trust in family, friends, and members of organizations or associations, and trust in strangers. Limited (or in-group or thick) trust is one type of trust, whereas generalized trust is another (Algan and Cahuc 2013).

On the other hand, discussing about trust involves two closed concepts such as mistrust and distrust. For Devine et. al. (2020) conceptualizing trust also includes mistrust and distrust. According to Citrin and Stoker (2018) mistrust is view as a "doubt or skepticism about the trustworthiness of the other, whereas distrust reflects a fixed view that the other is untrustworthy", while, for Bertson (2018) mistrust represents "an unfavorable attitude held by an individual against her political system or its institutions and agents".

As a conclusion, Devine et al. (2020) stated that the trust has the dynamic and contextual characteristics of a three-situation context: In a certain domain, subject A trusts/mistrusts/distrusts B, where B can be an individual or an institution.

In this regard, trust in institutions is vital for economic progress (Hwang, 2017; Sumanjeet, 2015). More investment and other economic activity can be expected if the government is viewed as trustworthy and is thought to uphold the law, protect property rights, and keep tax policy stable (Knack and Keefer, 1997).

Institutional trust is a key factor in modern state governance allowing individuals to accept government authority supports the legitimacy, effective functioning, and stability of democratic systems (Hooghe et al., 2015), particularly because democracy cannot rely on coercion to the same extent that other regimes can (Hetherington, 2005). Contrary to popular belief, the growth of democratic systems has been associated with a drop in institutional trust (Zmerli, 2012), emphasizing the necessity of understanding its drivers. Some researchers (Van Bavel et al., 2020) point to the idea that greater trust in government leads to more compliance with policies.

Some researchers have pointed out that there is a strong connection between institutional and COVID-19 mortality (Oksanen et al., 2020). In this regard, the higher institutional trust the low Covid-19 mortality. In addition, people's trust in the government could interact with some key elements, meaning attitudes and behavior toward policies. Research has found that lockdown measures in the Netherlands during the pandemic led to an 18% increase in trust in the government (Oude Groeniger, Noordzij, van der Waal and de Koster, 2021).

Promise-keeping, accountability, efficiency, competence, caring, predictability, transparency, fairness, and honesty are all qualities that citizens value in public institutions (van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017). As a result, people evaluate the way that their institutions function in the public interest (Miller and Listhaug, 1990) and create results that meet their expectations (Hetherington, 2005). In this context, the institutional performance approach and the social trust approach have mostly been used to explain institutional trust, either directly or indirectly.

Some researchers appreciated that institutional trust is a result of institutional performance, according to the institutional performance method (Berg and Hjerm, 2010).

For Berg and Hjerm (2010) point of view both real performance and individual judgments are important. Therefore, institutional trust is frequently defined as an assessment of and reaction to an institution's design, performance, and results (Godfroit, Langer, and Meuleman, 2017).

Simultaneously, political sentiments, particularly trust, have been proven to differ significantly by gender (Campbell, 2012). According to studies, women have less political knowledge (Dow, 2009), less political engagement (Burns, 2008), less trust (Alesina and Ferrara, 2002), and interact less (Sartori, Tuorto, and Ghigi, 2017).

In this article, the following definition for trust will be operationalized:

1. Attachment to a person, collective of persons or institution, based on the well-founded but not certain expectation that he/she/they will act for my/our good.
2. The expectation, based on good but less than perfect evidence, that events will turn out in a way not harmful to me/us.

Based on the aforementioned arguments and standpoints, the following research hypotheses:

RH1: The level of self-awareness is influenced by the gender.

RH2: The level of trust in the institution is influenced by the level of trust in the institution's representative.

### 3. Methodology

During November 2021, we conducted an online survey among the students from the University Center of Bacau, Romania. The survey aimed to highlight the role that trust plays in forming opinions among students about the relationship with colleagues, friends, and family, but also how it relates to various state authorities, such as: parliament, government, mass media, NGOs, health system, universities, specialists, army.

The self-awareness indicator was measure using 5 questions regarding the perception of self-informed degree, the perception of the awareness regarding internal politics, foreign affairs, healthcare system, educational system and homeland security.

Also, through this research we aimed to highlight the way in which students are interested in issues related to issues related to domestic and foreign policy.

Finally, the research aims to capture the role that the high school graduate could play in adopting a cautious attitude towards his peers.

The Bacau University Center has two higher education institutions (Vasile Alecsandri University – UVA and George Bacovia University - UGB). The total number of students is 2.785 divided as follows UVA - 2.435 and UGB - 350. A cleaning procedure including completion accuracy was applied, resulting in a final sample of 633 individuals (N=633). The survey is based on percent of 22.72% from the total students, divided as follows 18.44% UVA and 52.57% from UGB.

The sample was diverse in respect to age (M=31.39, SD=10.83), gender (59.90% male), birthplace (65.60% from Moldova region), employment (64.50%), age below 30 (50.60%), age above 30 (49.40%), profile of the high school (science 45.3%, humanities 20.1%, vocational 6.50%, technical 28.10%) and university (29.10% UGB, 70.90% UVA). (Table 1)

*Table 1: Participants' characteristics*

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| <b>Gender</b>              |           |         |
| Male                       | 379       | 59.90   |
| Female                     | 254       | 40.10   |
| <b>Age</b>                 |           |         |
| Below 30 years             | 320       | 50.60   |
| Above 30 years             | 313       | 49.40   |
| <b>High School Profile</b> |           |         |
| Humanity                   | 127       | 20.10   |
| Sciences                   | 287       | 45.30   |
| Technical                  | 178       | 28.10   |
| Vocational                 | 41        | 6.50    |
| <b>University</b>          |           |         |
| George Bacovia Univ.       | 184       | 29.10   |
| Vasile Alecsandri Univ.    | 449       | 70.90   |
| <b>Birthplace</b>          |           |         |
| Moldova region             | 415       | 65.60   |
| Outside Romania            | 21        | 3.30    |
| Other regions of Romania   | 197       | 31.10   |
| <b>Employment status</b>   |           |         |
| Yes                        | 408       | 64.50   |
| No                         | 225       | 35.50   |

*Source: Processed by author*

### 4. Results

Participants were asked to answer to the question about their own level of information. In this regard, 65.70% of participants appreciate themselves as being well-informed, while 24.80% are not able to say whether they are or not. Furthermore, we investigate the

perception of the degree of how well-informed participants group of friends are, university colleagues and their own family. A percentage of 71.10% appreciated that their family members are “informed and very informed”, while 63.20% appreciated that the close group of friends are "informed and very informed".

Also, 38.10% of the participants had difficulties in appreciating the degree of information of their college colleagues, opting for the neutral, "unsure" option. Regarding the family members, the data show the lowest uncertainty, 13.30% (Table 2).

*Table 2: Perception of well-informed degree*

|            | Low level | Unsure | High level | NR     |
|------------|-----------|--------|------------|--------|
| Friends    | 9.50%     | 21.30% | 62.30%     | 7.10%  |
| Colleagues | 23.20%    | 38.50% | 27.20%     | 11.10% |
| Family     | 9.00%     | 13.30% | 71.10%     | 6.60%  |

*Source: Processed by author*

So, based on the perception of the well-informed degree, the most trustworthy groups are those of family, followed closed by group of friends.

Another survey task was to investigate the level of participant’s trust in interpersonal relationship. In this regard, they were asked to choose the answer describing them best, choosing between “*We can trust nobody*”, “*The most desirable behavior is to act with caution*”, “*We can trust all*”. In front of this dilemma, 93.40% of participants appreciated that the most desirable way to act in interpersonal relations is to be behave with caution. In other words, more than 90.00% indicates the participants predisposition to a cautious attitude and a low level of confidence. However, a relatively small percentage of participants (6.30%) believe that everyone can be trusted.

Furthermore, this low level of trust in interpersonal relations could affect the level of trust in institution and the representatives of the institutions. In this regard, the participants were asked to indicate the level of trust in some institutions and also the level of trust in the representatives of the institutions.

*Table 3: Level of trust in institutions*

|                   | Low level | Unsure | High level | NR    |
|-------------------|-----------|--------|------------|-------|
| Army              | 33.40%    | 17.70% | 43.40%     | 5.50% |
| Secret services   | 37.60%    | 27.30% | 46.70%     | 8.40% |
| Church            | 46.70%    | 16.10% | 32.50%     | 4.60% |
| Healthcare system | 44.80%    | 13.90% | 39.20%     | 2.10% |
| Local authorities | 60.70%    | 18.50% | 15.10%     | 5.70% |
| Parliament        | 70.10%    | 17.10% | 6.20%      | 6.60% |
| Political parties | 71.90%    | 16.30% | 4.30%      | 7.60% |
| Govern            | 70.50%    | 15.20% | 7.60%      | 7.00% |
| Justice           | 53.40%    | 16.90% | 23.4%      | 6.30% |
| Mass-media        | 64.20%    | 18.20% | 12.50%     | 5.20% |
| NGO's             | 45.50%    | 26.40% | 22.60%     | 5.50% |
| Universities      | 8.70%     | 13.90% | 73.40%     | 3.90% |

*Source: Processed by author*

The highest level of trust was recorded by universities, 73.40%, followed by long distance

by secret services (46.70%) and army (43.40%) and healthcare system (39.20%) on the third place. On the other side, the lowest level of trust is recorded in political parties (71.90%) and parliament (70.10%).

In other words, universities are the most trusted of all institutions. Surprisingly, the medical system does not enjoy a high degree of trust, a plausible explanation could be that of the health context faced by the whole world.

Based on the results, participants trust in institutions is very low, especially in political system. On the other hand, the political system does not seem to enjoy the trust of the survey participants at all (Table 3).

The data showed that local authorities also recorded a low level of trust (60.70%). And this could be interpreted by the fact that citizens do not appreciate local authorities as trustworthy. It should be mentioned that local authorities (especially the mayor) are elected directly by the citizen. So, in that case, the low rate of trust conduct to the idea that local authorities are not granted as trustworthy, which is essential in the trust paradigm.

Furthermore, the results show a lack of consistency between the institutions and the people regarded as representative.

### **RH1: The level of self-awareness is influenced by the gender**

In this section, we present our findings in answer to our first research hypothesis, meaning how citizens perceive the concepts of trust how gendered these perceptions are. Therefore, we calculated the value for Cronbach's Alpha for the 6 items about the level of self-awareness, obtaining  $\alpha = .81$ .

Furthermore, the data collected showed that 40.10% of female appreciated themselves as having a high degree of self-awareness in generally, while men seem to have a higher percentage (59.10%).

We noticed an important difference between various aspects of society (domestic politics, foreign affairs, healthcare system, homeland security, educational system). In this regard, 29.90% of the male and 14.40% of female can't appreciate the level of self-awareness about the internal politics. The domain of foreign politics obtained the same results (33.60% of male and 13.10% of female can't appreciate the level of self-awareness) as the healthcare (32.70% of male and 16.60% of female), homeland security (32.50% of male and 15.80% of female), education (31.40% of male and 13.10% of female). These results show a very low interest in domain essential for citizens and for society.

*Table 4: Descriptive of individual's self-awareness*

|   | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|---|----------|-------------|-----------|
| Self-awareness generally                | 633      | 1.40        | 0.963     |
| Self-awareness about internal politics  | 633      | 7.01        | 19.615    |
| Self-awareness about foreign affairs    | 633      | 6.09        | 17.884    |
| Self-awareness about healthcare         | 633      | 3.90        | 8.455     |
| Self-awareness about homeland security  | 633      | 4.15        | 10.670    |
| Self-awareness about educational system | 633      | 4.56        | 10.622    |

*Source: Processed by author*

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between gender and the level of generally self-awareness. There was a negative correlation between

the two variables,  $r = -.324$ ,  $p = .002$  meaning that gender is influencing the level of self-awareness. In our case, female seems to have a higher level of self-awareness than male.

*Table 5: Correlation individual self-awareness and gender*

|              |                     | Gender  | SA generally |
|--------------|---------------------|---------|--------------|
| Gender       | Pearson Correlation | 1       | -.324**      |
|              | Sig. (2-tailed)     |         | 0.002        |
|              | N                   | 633     | 633          |
| SA generally | Pearson Correlation | -.324** | 1            |
|              | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.002   |              |
|              | N                   | 633     | 633          |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Code: SA - Self-awareness**

The results revealed also that there is a significant correlation between individuals having a high degree of self-awareness about internal politics and foreign affairs ( $r=0.781$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), healthcare ( $r=0.335$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), homeland security ( $r=0.399$ ,  $p=0.00$ ).

Therefore, we can conclude that gender is influencing the level of self-awareness.

## **RH2: The level of trust in the institution is influenced by the level of trust in the institution's representative**

We structured our hypothesis in correlating the institution with the representative of institution, meaning the political system (Parliament, Government, local authorities with the politicians), the healthcare system (hospitals with physicians), mass-media (journals with journalists), educational system (university with scientists).

The results revealed also that there is a significant correlation between the trust in media and trust in journalists ( $r=0.491$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), health care system and physicians ( $r=0.660$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), universities and scientists ( $r=0.450$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), church and priests ( $r=0.569$ ,  $p=0.00$ ).

Regarding the correlation between political system and its representatives we found out the following: politicians – local authorities ( $r=0.565$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), politicians – Parliament ( $r=0.661$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), politicians – government ( $r=0.670$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), politicians – political parties ( $r=0.691$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). Surprisingly, the lowest level of correlation is between politicians – local authorities ( $r=0.565$ ,  $p=0.00$ ).

Based on the data recorded, the second research hypothesis is confirmed, meaning that there is a significant level of correlation between the trust in institutions and representatives.

## **5. Discussion**

The research reveals both intuitive and counterintuitive findings, thus making for an interesting assessment of Romanian students' behavior.

First, the main issue that must be underlined is the level of trust among students. According to their opinion, the most desirable attitude toward people is to act cautious. Basically, the very high percentage (93.40%) proves that "being cautious" is not just a current of opinion. However, it can even be considered a personality trait. Or, in this context, trust not only influences the way in which interpersonal relationships are set up. Moreover, it comes to

influence the relationship with state institutions. However, in this context, the resilience of citizens to decisions because of crisis situations seems to be explained.

In this context, trust in the state and institutions is influenced by the level of individual trust. In other words, the lower the level of interpersonal trust, the lower the level of trust in the state (Bilarrri, 2014).

The results also revealed that there is a significant correlation in terms of the role of the individual - as a representative of an institution - and the level of trust. In other words, the results show that in the case of institutions that enjoy a high level of trust, the role of the interpersonal relationship is defining. Surprisingly, the relationship of trust in local authorities does not seem to be so high. One of the explanations could be that the citizen-local authority relationship is a direct one that implies the satisfaction of specific, well-defined needs. And, in this context, the lack of involvement and administrative performance could be an argument.

One last counterintuitive finding is that individuals perceive themselves as having a high level of general well-awareness, but, in specific terms, on defining elements of the society, not only are they not perceived as informed, but they have difficulties in defining themselves as being informed or not. This may be a prerequisite for further research on the level of education in social skills. Due to this lack of trust in the citizens and the level of trust in the state institutions is affected. This conclusion could be the basis for explaining some situations and phenomena associated with crisis situations.

## **6. Conclusions**

People are inherently trustworthy beings. Indeed, they have such a tendency to trust far beyond point where facts and evidence would tell them to reject. However, when distrust sets in, it does so unexpectedly and cumulatively, and it may quickly spiral out of control. When social trust is broken, it tends to reorganize into a lower-level collective, which then forms hard borders around itself. In this paper, evidence of a possible gender gap about the level of self-awareness was brought to the fore. The findings show significant differences on self-awareness perception. This could be explained by the low level of female involving in society.

The results also showed a significant level between trust in the authorities and trust in the representatives of the authorities. In other words, we can appreciate the fact that the interaction between the citizen and the representative of the institution is defining in terms of the level of trust. There are however some limitations to the current analysis, as well as scope to expand this work in the future by investigating all the regions of Romania. Future research could start from the premise that people in certain regions are traditionally influenced by the cultural background that determines a certain way of reporting both in terms of trust in interpersonal relationships and the level of trust in authorities.

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