

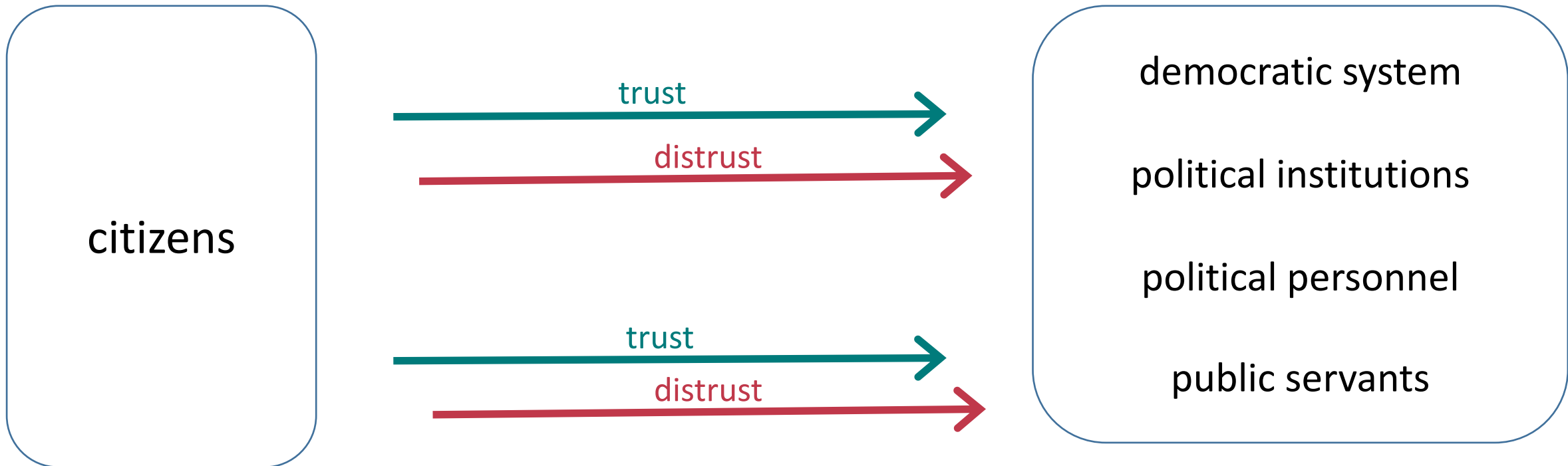
# Bargaining trust:

conceptual and empirical insights into the dilemma of trust and mistrust  
in encounters between street level bureaucrats and clients

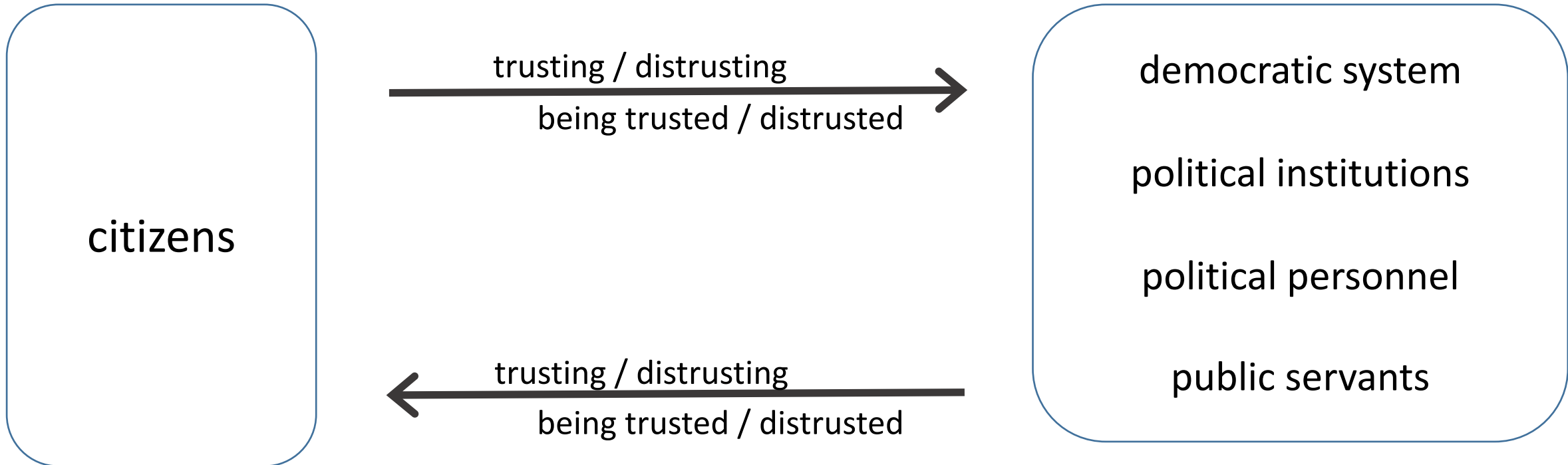
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# The basics of the conceptual framework: trust *and* distrust!



# The basics of the conceptual framework: dis/trust as reciprocal relations!



## Research aims

### Evidence

*(mapping,  
explaining)*

- Develop a theoretical framework and systematic data
- Analyse dis/trust formation in different arenas: street level, organisational fields, public spheres
- Compare seven countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Serbia)

### Agency

*(impact/  
dissemination)*

- Identify good practices, develop role models and policy recommendations
- Engage in dissemination, communication and exploitation
- Target-specific dialogue: policy and stakeholders, civil society, scientific community and general public

# Dis/trust formation at the street level

- The focus is on institutional trust....

not in regard to policy-forming institutions (governments, parliaments, judiciary), but in regard to policy-implementing institutions (here: public authorities at the local level)

- implementation as an arena of dis/trust formation – in particular street level bureaucracy as a relevant arena:
  - immediate relevance for everyday life matters of citizens
  - arena of direct encounters with public servants / frontline workers
  - encounters as spaces of direct experiences shaping attitudes and behaviours

# The empirical case:

- social welfare institutions dealing with disadvantaged families and granting social assistance (benefits and services)
- in urban areas in seven countries, mirroring diverse socio-economic contexts and welfare regimes
- semi-structured qualitative interviews with frontline workers (N=115) and mothers/fathers of vulnerable families (N=117) conducted between 3/2020 and 2/2021

→ a ‘critical’ case, potentially an ‘extreme case’

country	location	institutional affiliation of frontline workers	number of interviewed frontline workers <sup>1</sup>	number of interviewed citizens
Czech Republic	Brno	municipality offices' frontline workers, labour office frontline workers, social housing facilities' frontline workers	15 [13 f; 2 m; experience: 2-29 yrs.]	15 [14 f; 1m]
Denmark	Two mid-sized municipalities: "Toldbro" and "Gammelborg"	family advisers of municipal family departments	16 [14 f; 2 m; experience: 1-22 yrs.]	16 [16 f]
Germany	"A-Stadt": a mid-sized city in the west of Germany and "B-Stadt": a large city in the east of Germany	Youth welfare offices, social welfare offices, jobcentres	21 [14 f; 7 m experience: 5-37 yrs.]	23 [19 f; 4 m]
Greece	Attica region: three municipalities	Community Centres; municipal 'social policy and solidarity services'	15 [12 f; 3 m; experience 1-35 yrs.]	15 [15 f]
Italy	Tuscany region: six municipalities	municipality offices, offices of 'local health unit', cooperatives providing social services, local units of ministry of interior/justice	15 [13 f; 2 m; experience from below 10 to 20+]	15 [8 f; 7 m]
Poland	Warsaw	municipality social assistance centres in five locations of the city	18 [16 f; 2 m; experience: 2-30 yrs.]	18 [12 f; 6 m]
Serbia	Belgrade	City Centre for Social Work in Belgrade and SOS Children's Villages	15 [15 f, experience: 5-25 yrs.]	15 [12 f; 3 m]
Number of interviewees in total			115	117

# The theoretical assumptions

social assistance for vulnerable families as a ‘critical’/’extreme’ case:

- low levels of institutional trust among the unprivileged (Arvanitidis et al. 2021)
- and limited trust also among frontline workers, because they
  - see regulators and public policies as unsupportive (Davidovitz/Cohen 2021a)
  - experience superiors distrusting them (Lipsky 1980)
  - feel betrayed by clients and develop suspicious approach (Davidovitz/Cohen 2021b)
- however: contextual variation, e.g., socio-economic situation (Drake et al. 2019), welfare regimes (Rothstein/Stolle 2001).

# Findings: institutional distrust

Citizens (and frontline workers) share institutional distrust in all countries – reasons given:

- opacity of the system: fragmentation, lack of transparency, organised irresponsibility
- power asymmetry: arbitrariness, unreliability, disrespect, humiliation
- carelessness: lack of time, high workload, constant staff replacement
- but also welfare chauvinism: eligibility and deservingness

→ institutional differentiation less between countries, but within public authorities: family counselling vs. cash benefit units

“No one cares and you are totally surrendered and then you are also really in despair. [...] You are really afraid of them. Also, because they have such uncanny power, right? And also, this arbitrariness, right? This is just the worst.” (DE CIT 5).

“In the few years I have been working in this municipality, almost one third of the employees have been replaced. And I think it creates an insane amount of distrust hmm for the citizens.(...) I will risk my neck and say that, under these conditions, it is difficult to take care of the citizens”(DK FA14)

“I may be judged as a racist, but I don't care at all. All foreigners receive so many benefits while Greeks are excluded from them.” (GR CIT4).



# Encounters under the shadow of distrust

- formal procedures do not necessarily require trust:
  - formal application with recognized proofs, validation through interviews, means-testing procedures and eligibility checks, signed action plan with binding commitments;
- however, personal encounters are decisive for case work, but tend to favor trust-building:
  - intentional: trust as an instrumental or functional resource facilitating case-work
  - (un)intentional: trust as an integral part of human interaction changing / complementing (formal) relationships

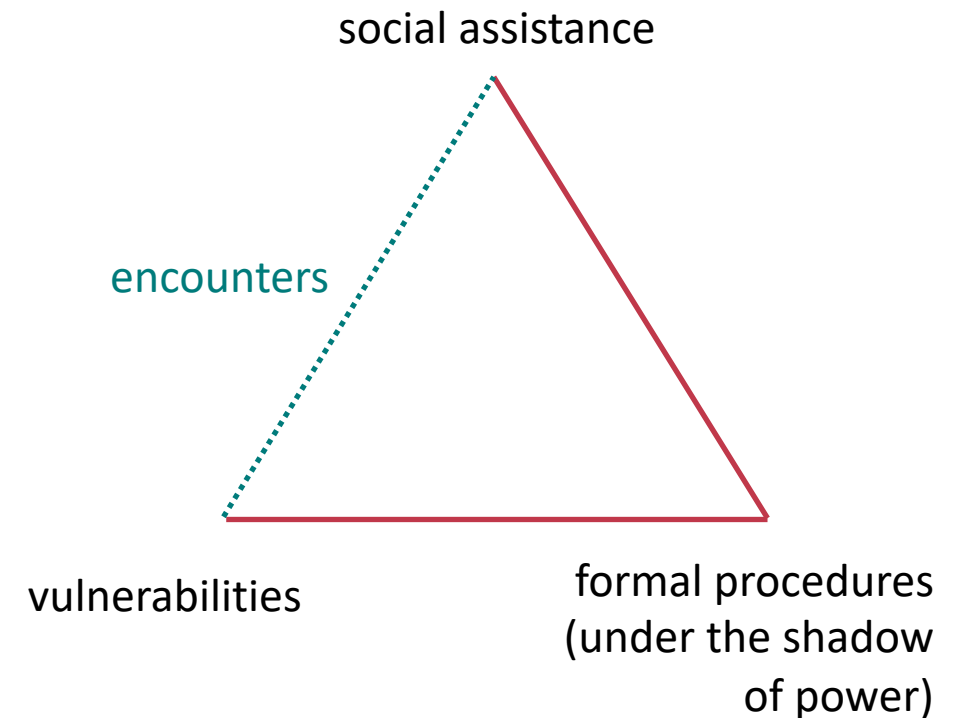
“Without such a small amount of trust in what we are doing here, we cannot act. (...) Then we would have to go via the court all the time because without trust, there is no relationship and without relationships, we cannot provide help. Then everything would take place in a coercive context. And then a lot of help would come too late, not come at all or, yes, for everything the road would be bumpier” (DE SLB 13/YWO).

“I’ve been able to talk about it with her because without trust, I would not talk to her, and she managed to win my trust and I opened-up, both me and my husband” (IT CIT 2).

# Bargaining trust: the dilemma

Encounters are:

- a situation of mutual dependencies...
  - frontline workers depend on collaboration by citizens to do their case work
  - vulnerable citizens depend on frontline workers to grant benefits / prevent interventions
- ...with an asymmetric relation of power
  - frontline workers with discretionary decision-making powers
  - vulnerable citizens – in principle – with option to enforce assistance



# (Implicit) strategies: frontline workers

- limiting the effect of institutionalised trust-killing-factors:
  - power relations: avoiding sanctions, whenever possible
  - case overloads: devoting time, wherever possible.
- guaranteeing closeness, also in spatial terms (counselling at local schools, home visits), provide safe spaces
- impression management: strategic use of personal traits (e.g., age, gender, parenthood) to signal commonalities, and professional skills to underline reliability.

→ grant a “credit of trust” beyond/against institutionalised procedures, establishing implicit expectations

“Well, it happens that they are very open, that they even say ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have told you this, maybe now this will be held against me in some way, but here I told you’. It just happens to me and then, of course, I explain that it will not be held against them, that it is good that they recognize the problem, (...) that I can actually help them better when I have a complete picture” (RS, FW8).

“We’ve set it up in such a way that each social worker has three clients in order to, simply, be able to, let’s say, bond with each other, but in a professional sense. In order to build trust with each other. Not to be, like, every day someone else comes” (CZ SLB 14).

# (Implicit) strategies: citizens

- low expectations, little readiness to disclose confidential information in initial encounters
- expecting frontline workers to do the first step
- matching expectations depending on reciprocity and reliability: perceived good will and assessment actions

→ follow a “defensive” approach: reactive and pragmatic approach as encounters develop, balancing their efforts against the expected gains, and granting their case workers the necessary time to prove their trustworthiness

“And it also depends on the attitude of the social workers, because he’s (the interviewee’s husband) got such a witch, it’s unbelievable. And a different one’s willing to help with everything, right? It’s like every door has different rules, right, but they (social workers) are under the same (institution), but each one of them does it the way they want” (CZ CIT 7).

“I was very lucky because I found smart people who took care of me and therefore it is a well-placed trust. Clearly, at the beginning, I too was a bit hesitant because indeed, you are in a critical situation, so you don’t know if you are understood or accepted” (IT CIT 10).

# Discussion and conclusion:

- relations between citizens and public authorities marked by institutional distrust, everywhere!
- trust-building in public authorities a matter of personal relations, not institutionalised procedures, everywhere!
- trust-building is negotiated within personal encounters, in part against institutional pressures everywhere!
- personal trust-building is institutionally ‘managed’ (unintentionally) everywhere!

- personal trust helps to „repair“ implementation deficiencies within the institutionalised settings of public authorities
  - *trust is an instrumental and functional resource strategically used*
- yet, trust can only play its role, if the instrumental dimension is overcome:
  - *relations of trust between frontline workers and citizens gain a semi-private understanding: openness and reliability, closeness, warmth and care*
- personal trust remains attached to encounters and the immediate needs of frontline workers and citizens
  - *little probability of a spill-over from personal to institutional trust*

# Literature

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