

## German WP5 report: Taking a Processual Perspective on Trust and Distrust in Institutional and Interpersonal Contexts

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

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# German WP5 report: Taking a Processual Perspective on Trust and Distrust in Institutional and Interpersonal Contexts

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## 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	<b>First lockdown:</b> Closure of schools & kindergartens; contact restrictions (distance & certain number of people allowed); no body-related services	03/2020	05/2020*
2	<b>Lockdown light:</b> Closure of gastronomy; obligatory masks in open businesses, schools, and kindergartens, as well as at work; contact restrictions	11/2020	12/2020
3	<b>Hard lockdown:</b> In addition to restrictions from "lockdown light ", schools and kindergartens had to close	12/2020	03/2021*
5	<b>Federal emergency brake:</b> 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	<b>3G-rules:</b> 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
<b>Focus group 11-12 A (n = 4)</b>						
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
<b>Focus group 11-12 B (n = 4)</b>						
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
<b>Focus group 14-15 A (n = 4)</b>						
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
<b>Focus group 14-15 B (n = 3)</b>						
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 <sup>a</sup>	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. <sup>a</sup>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	
		Uterior 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 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 adolescents 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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