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The Psychology Of Public Trust

Public trust is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, and governments today cannot afford to ignore its social-psychological aspects, said Professor David Chan at a conference organised by SMU's Behavioural Sciences Institute.



AsianScientist (Mar. 2, 2018) – By Sim Shuzhen – Most governments worry a lot about trust, and rightly so—it is extremely difficult to attract investors, start a business, pass legislation or manage a crisis in an environment where trust is low.

But while leaders pay significant attention to the economics and politics of public trust, they often neglect its social-psychological dimensions, said Professor David Chan, Director of the Singapore Management University (SMU) Behavioural Sciences Institute (BSI).

“Fundamentally, trust is a psychological perception,” emphasised Professor Chan during his keynote lecture at the 2018 BSI conference, held on 6 February with the theme ‘Public Trust in Singapore’.

Findings and implications from behavioural sciences studies of the social-psychological processes involved in the trustor-trustee relationship are therefore critical to better understand public trust, prevent its erosion and find ways to enhance it in society, he added.

Trust, a many-sided issue

Trust is complex and multi-dimensional for both trustor and trustee, said Professor Chan. The trustor’s propensity to trust depends on his or her beliefs, expectations and perceptions about the trustee. But the issues are not simple; correcting false beliefs, for example, involves more than just denouncing fake news.

“If people believe that what we call fake news is indeed the truth, then the more we ‘attack’ the fake news without thinking through how to address their beliefs, the more they would not trust us, because they think we are attacking the truth. We therefore need to work on how to effectively point out what or which part of the news is the falsehood and what the facts are,” explained Professor Chan.

On the other side of the relationship is the trustee’s trustworthiness as perceived by the trustor. There are three important dimensions of perceived trustworthiness—competence, integrity and benevolence, said Professor Chan. In the case of governments, trust in competence refers to the public’s confidence in governing bodies to solve problems affecting people’s lives, such as those relating to infrastructure and the delivery of public services. Trust in integrity, meanwhile, has to do with the public’s perception of the government’s character, and involves issues of honesty, incorruptibility and impartiality.

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Trust in benevolence refers to the public's confidence that the government is authentic (it says what it means and means what it says) and has good intentions or motivations for undertaking a particular action or policy. This is one of the hardest forms of trust to gain, and one that means a lot to the public but is often neglected by governments, said Professor Chan.

"Often, the problem may not be that the government is actually not sincere, but that it is not perceived as sincere because it has not paid adequate attention to the nature of its actions, engagement and communications," he explained.

The changing nature of trust

In addition to its multiple facets, trust is also dynamic and sensitive to the context. A trust level at any point in time must never be taken as fixed or a given, said Professor Chan.

"Trust is hard to build, easy to lose, and once lost, difficult to restore," he told the audience. "That's why we find trust so precious, when trust erosion is easy and trust repair is difficult."

The dynamic nature of trust is why it is very difficult to predict future levels of public trust based on historical trends, continued Professor Chan.

"I could have been trusting the government for the past 20 years, but if it does something now that really violates my values, I may stop trusting it," he explained. "Trust can move rapidly and abruptly, so we need to be careful when making decisions and policies based on trends and projections."

Similarly, surveys and general measures of trust, such as the widely cited Edelman trust barometer, should be interpreted with caution, and governments should focus more on changes in trust over time within their own country, instead of being fixated on their countries' ranking relative to other countries, said Professor Chan.

Professor Chan elaborated on this point during a panel discussion held after his keynote address.

"When people vote, they don't care where their country stands globally in the countries ranking list on trust. They care about where they themselves stand today in their quality of life compared to where they were in the past few years," he explained.

"It's the lived experiences that Singaporeans go through that will determine their trust levels and reactions. Thus, it is intra-country and intra-individual changes over time, and not inter-country ranking positions, that are most important for politicians to bear in mind and focus on. After all, the people's quality of life is the essence of being citizen-centric."

A roadmap for trust

Despite its dynamic nature, the good news is that trust is neither random nor predetermined; trust levels can be predicted to some extent and they can be enhanced, said Professor Chan, who rounded up his talk by outlining a roadmap for addressing public trust in Singapore.

Although governments may be used to taking on authoritative roles, they must approach trust with a more pluralistic mindset—for example, by taking a wider range of different perspectives into account when it comes to making policy, continued Professor Chan.

During the panel discussion, Professor Chan further stressed the importance of diversity in views, noting that Singapore has ample and relevant people resources that should be tapped on more.

"I think Singapore's strongest asset is that across the board and across different sectors, we have good people who are not just smart, but who also have integrity and are able and willing to put nation above

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self. We see this not only in political leaders, but also in academics, teachers, civil servants, leaders of non-governmental organisations, and ordinary members of the public,” he said.

Paradoxically, however, Singapore’s greatest asset in the social networks among individuals with various types of influence can also be its liability. The country’s strong social capital, said Professor Chan, may be too concentrated among a relatively small group of people.

“We work together so much in so many settings, such that if we are wrong, then we are all reliably wrong together. That is very dangerous,” said Professor Chan, ending with a word of caution. “A lack of the ability and willingness to learn to see things from another’s perspective is one of our greatest dangers.”

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