PUBLIC TRUST AND HIGH STAKES ASSESSMENT

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SUMMARY

Contemporary society seems to be characterised by a 'crisis of trust'. Opinion polls show a decline in trust in many public institutions and professions. Trust, and its drivers, has been studied in a variety of contexts, including the government, the police force, and the medical profession. To date, the extent to which this 'culture of suspicion' has permeated the area of assessment in the UK has not been assessed. Media are thought to fuel and feed-off distrust. Given the increasing scrutiny of examinations and examination standards by the British press, it seems likely that public trust in assessment outputs may have undergone changes. This paper draws upon theoretical work on the meaning of trust and empirical studies into trust in public institutions to suggest possible avenues for future research in trust and assessment.

BACKGROUND

Why is trust important?

The information provided by those responsible for educational assessment can be put to a multitude of purposes. Examination results impact upon the educational and employment choices of students, parents and employers. They provide a basis for selecting individuals for higher education courses or particular jobs, and qualify individuals to perform certain vocational or professional activities. Assessment outputs are not only used to judge students, but also those responsible for teaching them – teachers and schools may be rewarded or reproved on the basis of their students' performance. Furthermore, examination results can be used in the development of policy arguments for alternate modes of education and training or to compare the educational accomplishments of one society with those of another (O'Neill, 2005). When it comes to examination results, the life chances of students, the careers of those who teach them, and the reputation of the nation's educational system and its ability to create a workforce that can compete in a global market are at stake. For these reasons, it is imperative that those who use examination results can trust and have confidence in them.

A 'culture of suspicion'

Trust is necessary for the smooth functioning of society (Fukuyama, 1995; Luhmann, 1979). Baier (1986) has observed that we notice trust as we notice air, only when it has become scarce or polluted. Over recent years, it has increasingly been claimed that we are facing a 'crisis of trust':

> "They (Sociologists and journalists) claim that we are in the grip of a deepening crisis of public trust that is directed even at our most familiar institutions and office-holders. Mistrust, it seems, is now directed not just at those clearly in breach of law and accepted standards, not just at crooks and wide boys. Mistrust and suspicion

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> *have spread across all areas of life, and supposedly with good reason."*
> (O'Neill, 2002, p. 8)

Indeed, opinion polls suggest that there has been a marked decline in trust in public institutions not only in the UK, but in a number of developed countries (Cabinet Office, 2004; cited in Kelly 2005; Duffy *et al* 2003; Ryan, 2000; cited in Kelly, 2005). O'Neill (2002), however, argued that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that people or institutions have become less trustworthy, or indeed that we trust less. She has highlighted a paradox in that whilst we *say* (and tell pollsters) that we trust less, our actions suggest otherwise. For example, *"we may **say** we don't trust hospital consultants, and yet apparently we want operations…we may **say** that we don't trust the police, but then we call them when trouble threatens"* (O'Neill, 2002, pp. 44-45). For O'Neill, this lack of active refusal to trust by the public suggests that the supposed 'crisis of trust' is in-fact a 'culture of suspicion'.

A possible explanation for this erosion of trust or 'culture of suspicion' (O'Neill, 2002) is an overall decline in deference to authority and increasing reliance on personal judgements of risk. In a post-modern society, trust is earned by governments, organisations and groups from autonomous, reflexive individuals (Giddens, 1990). Barber (1983) has cited three reasons for the decline in public trust:

> *"One has to do with the ever more powerful knowledge that the professions now have to influence individual and public welfare. Another has to do with the increasing strength of the value of equality in our society, the increasing desire of the less powerful of all kinds to have a little more control over those whose greater power vitally affects them. Ours is a revolutionary time for the value of equality. Finally, a third is the increased knowledge and competence that a better educated public brings to its relations with professional and other experts and leaders."*
> (p. 132)

An important consequence of distrust is that public institutions and professionals are increasingly being held to account for their activities, a trend that Power (1997) has aptly termed the 'audit explosion'. According to O'Neill (2002) the assumption that accountability is an alternative to trust is mistaken, and has distorted the proper aims of professional practice. In the field of assessment, the second order uses of examination results for accountability purposes can have perverse implications (O' Neill, 2005). Schools, for example, may gravitate towards examination boards that seem to offer less demanding specifications in a subject in the hope that they will receive a greater proportion of grades A-C, even if it is educational inferior. O'Neill (2005) argued that what is needed is *intelligent accountability*, which combines *"informed judgement of what has been done, by independent bodies whose results are intelligently communicated"* (p. 17).

Transparency and openness have also been actively pursued in the hope that they will build or restore trust. As with accountability, O'Neill (2002, p. 68) argued that trust has receded as transparency has advanced. Increased transparency can produce vast amounts of information and misinformation, which unless sorted and assessable can lead to confusion. Individuals place or refuse trust because they can trace information and activities to particular sources whose reliability can be verified. In other words, *"well-placed trust grows out of active enquiry*

rather than blind acceptance" (O'Neill, 2002, p. 76). In the field of assessment, O'Neill (2005) argued that assessment practices may be entirely trustworthy, but they are manifestly too complex for pupils, parents, or teachers to judge them for themselves. Hence it is likely that they will fail to evoke trust.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000, p. 585) argued that *'the media feed off and aggravate the spiral of distrust'*. British media have not been subjected to the revolution of accountability to the same degree as other societal institutions (O'Neill, 2002). The information they provide may be *accessible* by the public but not *assessable* by the public (O'Neill, 2002, p. 95). Indeed, Newton (2005) argued that media reports fundamentally threaten public understanding of assessment. Examinations, and specifically examination standards, have come under increasing scrutiny from the press. Common headlines include assertions that educational standards are falling, examinations are getting easier and so on (Murphy, 2004). The technicalities of grading examinations have also been brought into question (Warmington & Murphy, n.d). More recently, such concerns have focussed upon the trustworthiness of electronic marking. It seems likely that this increased scrutiny by the media has impacted upon trust in assessment.

Trust is clearly central to the operations of awarding bodies, but is yet to be studied in the context of assessment. In assessment, more so than any other area of public life, there may be evidence of the beginnings of something greater than a 'culture of suspicion'. The trend for Independent schools to take up International GCSE, which are not recognised by either the Department for Children, Schools and Families or the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (Marley, 2007) may be viewed as an active refusal to trust (something O'Neill perceives to be rare). Likewise, the increasing popularity of the International Baccalaureate suggests mistrust in the current A level system. Enquiries after results received by awarding bodies from centres may also be indicative of a lack of trust in examination results. Taylor (2007b), for example, observed an increase in the number of re-mark requests across GCSE components offered by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) between 2005 and 2006. If trust in UK systems of education is not restored, awarding bodies could suffer significant financial losses.

A gap in the literature regarding trust and assessment is promising for research in the area. This paper draws upon theoretical and empirical research from other areas of public life to point to factors that may be important to a study of trust in assessment. Pathways for studying trust in assessment are suggested, along with important considerations for anyone wishing to explore the issue of trust in this context. First, however, a discussion of what is meant by 'trust' is necessary.

What is 'trust'?

Trust has been studied from a variety of perspectives and consequently subject to many definitions. For philosophers, trust concerns moral and justifiable behaviour (Baier, 1986; Hosmer, 1995); in economic terms, however, trust is viewed as a rational calculation of costs and benefits (Coleman, 1990; Williamson, 1993). At the level of the individual, trust is conceptualised as the extent to which people are prepared to make themselves vulnerable to others (Frost, Stimpson, & Maughan, 1978; Rotter, 1967). From an organisational perspective, trust is a collective judgement that another group will not behave opportunistically, is honest in transactions, and acts in accordance with commitments (Bradach & Eccles, 1989, Cummings & Bromily, 1996).

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Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) reviewed the literature on trust spanning forty years. They argued that, regardless of the context of study, there are certain aspects of trust that feature in most definitions. Vulnerability and honesty are both common features of definitions of trust. Interdependence is a necessary condition of trust, whereby the interests of one party cannot be met without reliance upon another (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Students, parents, teachers and employers, for example, must rely upon awarding bodies to correctly mark and grade examination papers. In the absence of interdependence there is no need for trust, and interdependence brings with it vulnerability. A person's level of comfort in a vulnerable or risky situation is an indication of their level of trust. Mishra (1996) argued that such comfort is embedded in the belief that another party is competent, reliable, open and concerned. Honesty is concerned with integrity and authenticity. Rotter (1967, p. 651), for example, defined trust as the *"expectancy that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another group can be relied upon"*. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2000, p. 556) analysis of the trust literature led them to arrive at the following multi-dimensional definition of trust:

> *"Trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest and (e) open."*

Interpersonal trust versus public trust

The trust literature identifies two forms of trust: interpersonal trust and public trust. In the context of the medical profession, Hall, Dugan, Zheng and Mishra (2001, p. 615) defined trust in interpersonal terms as *"the optimistic acceptance of a vulnerable situation in which the truster believes the trustee will care for the truster's interests."* Public trust may be viewed as a generalised attitude. It is trust placed by a group or individual in a societal institution or system (Van der Schee, Braun, Calnan, Schnee & Groenewegen, 2007; Van der Schee, Groenewegen, & Friele, 2006). Public trust may seem more applicable to a study of trust in assessment, but ultimately both types of trust are related (Parker & Parker, 1993). Public trust is in part influenced by an individual's experiences in contacts with representatives of an institution or system (Van der Schee et al, 2006). A teacher, for example, may have frequent contact with a subject officer at an examination board and establish interpersonal trust. Such a teacher may then be more inclined to trust in any subsequent examination results published by the board.

There are variations in the extent to which individuals are willing to trust. The attitudes of some individuals make them more inclined to extend trust more readily, in that they have a "disposition to trust" (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998). Moods and emotions are also powerful when individuals make trust judgements. People have emotional responses to trust relationships because they are, by definition, in a vulnerable situation. Confidence in trust relationships is rooted in the assumption that the other party has genuine concern for the well being of the truster, which is likely to lead to the truster liking the other person (McAllister, 1995). Furthermore, there is a tendency for people to extend trust more readily to people they view as similar to themselves, what Zucker (1986) termed characteristic-based trust.

In terms of factors that shape public trust in societal institutions, media attention and public discourse have been identified as highly influential in determining levels of public trust (Mechanic & Schlesinger, 1996; Mechanic, 1998). In the United States, Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn (2000) specifically linked trust in the national government to political scandals and increased media attention on political corruption and scandal. Likewise, it has been suggested

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that trust in the health care profession in the UK has been eroded by incidents such as the conviction of General Practitioner Howard Shipman and the enquiry into paediatric cardiac surgery in Bristol (Calnan & Sanford, 2004). Education has not been without scandal over recent years, including the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) crisis in 2000, the Edexcel crisis in 2001, and the A level results crisis in England in 2002. McCaig (n.d.) argued that these three unrelated incidents were evidence of the increased social awareness of the importance of examination results, and thus, the politicisation of examination standards and the examination process. An element of this is the increased media attention that education has received, much of which has followed a falling standards template (Murphy & Warmington, 2003, 2004, n.d.). It seems likely that educational scandals and increased media attention will have had some impact on public trust.

Other factors that may impact on people's trust in societal institutions are contacts with representatives of institutions (Mechanic & Schlesinger, 1996) and knowledge of the institution. In a study of the judicial system in the UK (Home Office, 2004), a clear relationship was found between how much people knew about the different constituent agencies of the criminal justice system and their perceived effectiveness. Taylor (2007a) conducted a qualitative study into the perceptions and opinions of key stakeholders regarding the examination process. It was found that parents, teachers and students were largely unaware of awarding body marking procedures and lacked a coherent understanding of the examination system in general. Such findings are cause for concern, as lack of understanding by stakeholders can result in misconceptions and mistrust of the work awarding bodies perform (Taylor 2007a). Finally, people in different countries may differ in their general disposition to trust institutions. In a comparison of public trust in health care between Germany, the Netherlands and England and Wales, Van der Schee *et al* (2007) identified cultural differences as an important source of the difference in levels of trust.

STUDIES OF TRUST IN PUBLIC INSITUTIONS

Studies into the perceptions of examinations standards (MORI/CDELL, 2002) and key stakeholder experiences of the A level and GCSE system have been conducted (Ipsos MORI, 2006). These studies have been concerned with issues such as whether students are doing better than 10/20/30 years ago, or whether it is harder to get top grades than it was 10/20/30 years ago. To date, no study has attempted to measure directly levels of trust in the education system or examination results, and more importantly, to understand its key drivers. Findings from research into trust in public institutions and their outputs more widely, however, can be drawn upon to inform a discussion of trust in education.

A recent study, *Trust in Public Institutions*, conducted by the MORI Social Research Institute sought to explore the concept of trust in three areas of local public services: police forces, hospitals and local authorities (Duff, Downing, & Skinner, 2003). The aim of the study was to develop a model of the factors that influence trust in public services and products. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 1,708 participants aged over 15 years across Great Britain. Overall, it was found that ratings of public sector organisations tended to be positive, and levels of trust high. The public, however, remained critical of the public sector on a number of counts including: the level of information they provide, the quality of management and, above all, openness and honesty in handling mistakes. Furthermore, the level of trust varied by public sector organisation, with the public being most positive about the NHS, marginally less so about the police, and especially critical of local councils (Duff *et al*, 1993).

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In terms of the key drivers of trust, regression analysis of the survey data revealed six core factors that influenced trust in the public organisations studied. These factors included: keeping promises, learning from mistakes, what friends and family say about the service, staff treating people well, being interested in peoples' views, and the quality of public leaders and managers. Duff *et al* (1993) concluded that when public organisations performed well on each of these factors, levels of trust would be high. High levels of trust in local hospitals, for instance, appeared to be a consequence of positive perceptions of the way staff treat patients and the opinions of friends and family. The participants surveyed held negative perceptions of local councils on five out of the six factors identified as key determinants of trust. Thus, a low level of trust in local councils was not surprising.

The qualitative aspect of the research pointed to high profile mistakes by public sectors as having an important impact on trust. Two-thirds of participants said that mistakes undermine their trust, either in the specific organisation responsible for the mistake or in public organisations more widely. Duff *et al* (1993, p. 3) argue that it is *"critical that actions taken to ensure these mistakes are not repeated are well publicised."*

With regard to variation in levels of trust among the public, socio-economic group was found to be largely unrelated to trust, *"trust is more closely related to values and beliefs, which cut across standard socio-economic circumstances"* (Duff *et al*, 1993, p. 3). Recent *contact* with the organisation, however, was found to be related to trust, with the impact of contact varying by public sector organisation. Recent contact with the local NHS, for example, was related to higher levels of trust. The opposite was true of contact with the local police, and contact with the local council had no effect. Finally, the research found evidence of the way in which trust can impact on the way the public engage with public organisations. Low levels of trust mean that people lose confidence in services, reduce contact with them and are less likely to engage positively in helping and planning services. In the case of the police, for example, those who are distrusting of the organisation are less inclined to assist in police enquiries. Awarding bodies are continually attempting to improve upon the services and products they deliver. The AQA, for instance, states in its manifesto *"we will… modernise and continuously improve what we do and how we do it"* (AQA, 2007). Reluctance of key stakeholders to engage with the organisation, brought about by reduced trust, is likely to be detrimental to this process.

The medical profession represents one area of public life where a decline in trust has been well documented. In the United States, serial opinion surveys from 1965 to 2000 show a slow, steady decline of public confidence in the medical profession (Simone, 2007). Simone links this decline to a number of social phenomena, such as, the continuing decline in respect for authority and *"the information explosion, prosperity, vast internal migration and other secular trends"* (p. 6). Schlesinger (2002; cited in Simone, 2007) examined the decline in trust in the medical profession (which is applicable to other professions) and offered four explanations for the change. These included doubts about **professional efficacy** caused by highly publicised errors in medical judgement, over-hyped treatments, and treatments that prove dangerous or unnecessary. Questions have also been raised about **professional agency**. Historically, the authority and trust granted the medical profession has been founded on the belief that professionals will act as reliable agents, placing the patient's well-being above their own self-interest. Commercial relationships with pharmaceutical and medical companies and the growth of a market-orientated medical system have undermined trust in the motives of representatives of the medical profession. Theoretical research has shown that altruistic behaviour is definitive to trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

According to Schlesinger (2002; cited in Simone, 2007), the rise of **countervailing authority** and **violation of professional boundaries** have also contributed to the erosion of trust in the medical profession. Individuals are now empowered consumers who gather information (or misinformation) from the internet, patient advocacy groups, and advertising campaigns, thereby reducing the influence of the medical profession. In the United States, the medical profession has also been weakened by engaging in political activities which go against popular opinion, such as the American Medical Association's opposition to Medicare. Simone (2007) notes that the public's attitude toward individual doctors has followed a similar, although less severe downward trend, with this trend subject to variations. This highlights the complex relationship between interpersonal trust and public trust. Indeed, in the UK, there is evidence to suggest that whilst trust in the public health care system is in decline, trust in doctors remains strong, at least compared to other professional occupations (Calnan & Sanford, 2004). Likewise, in relation to the criminal justice system in the UK (the police, prison and probation services, courts and the Crown Prosecution Service) people tend to have more confidence in the way crime is dealt with at a local than at a national level (Home Office, 2004).

An analysis of trust in the American medical profession has some important implications for anyone wishing to study trust in the UK examination system. Firstly, trust must be placed within the broader social and cultural context. It seems, for example, that New Labour's education- centred political agenda in 1994 was partly responsible for increased public attention on educational standards (Warmington, Murphy, & McCaig, 2005). Second, consideration must be given to levels of trust in individual representatives of the examination system versus trust in larger agencies. For example, trust in examiners may be higher than trust in awarding bodies. Indeed, in a recent customer satisfaction survey, teachers were asked to select three words from a list of eighteen words to best describe their perceptions of English awarding bodies; *trustworthy* represented 4 *per cent* of the total responses for both AQA and OCR and only 2 *per cent* of responses for Edexcel (Chamberlain & Taylor, 2006).

Awarding bodies provide largely-publicised figures in the form of national examination results. Thus, another area of public life where parallels may be drawn with awarding bodies is trust in official statistics. Fellegi (2004) identified three factors essential to maintaining confidence in a statistical office: 1) structural factors – organisational independence; 2) statistical factors – sound statistical processes and quality outputs; and 3) reputational factors – good communication with stakeholders. In 2004, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Statistics Commission jointly undertook a project to assess public confidence in British official statistics (Kelly, 2005). The aim of the research was to understand the issues underlying or driving public confidence in official statistics and to develop a quantitative measure of public confidence. The project consisted of four parts: 1) desk based research on similar projects conducted by other national statistical offices; 2) a qualitative study of the general public's confidence in official statistics; 3) a qualitative study of key opinion-formers views of official statistics; and 4) a quantitative study of the general public's confidence in official statistics (Simmons & Betts, 2006).

The qualitative and quantitative studies took a two-dimensional approach to participants' assessment of statistics, in that a clear distinction was made between the quality of outputs and the delivery of outputs. Overall, greater confidence was found in the quality of official statistics than in the delivery of those statistics. Participants expressed considerable confidence in the methodologies used to produce official statistics and the accuracy of outputs. Participants were, however, concerned that there was interference at certain stages of the statistical process by those with a vested interest e.g., political interference in the production of statistics and

concealment of errors made in the production process. It was not surprising then, that survey respondents' identified independence of statistical services as one of the most salient factors for ensuring confidence in statistics.

With regard to the examination system, it has long been acknowledged that government influence has fuelled concern that A Levels and GCSEs have been 'dumbed down'. As a recent newspaper article stated:

> *"The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority watchdog reports to ministers on whether exams standards have been maintained. But those same ministers are responsible for making sure exam results continue to rise every year."*
> (*Guardian Unlimited*, 26 September 2007)

On the 26 September 2007, Ed Balls, the Schools Secretary announced at a Labour conference that the QCA will independently monitor examination standards, free from ministerial influence. It is hoped that the independent watchdog will increase society's confidence that examination standards are being maintained (*The Sunday Times*, 30 September, 2007; *The Times*, 26 September, 2007). There is evidence to suggest that this move will be popular among teachers - in a recent survey of experiences of the A level and GCSE examination system, the majority of teachers (77%, n=506) agreed that the examination system needs to be independently regulated and controlled by a body other than awarding bodies or the Department for Education and Skills (Ipsos MORI, 2006). Whether a new independent regulator will increase public trust in the examination system is yet to be seen.

In the official statistics project discussed above (Kelly, 2005), improving communication on a number of levels was seen as vital to maximising public trust. Participants had little knowledge of the statistical information available or how to access it. Furthermore, there was a widespread belief among respondents that the Government and the media manipulated and misrepresented official statistics to, for example, support a political policy or argument. For this reason, it was considered vital that explanatory information be provided with statistical outputs, such as how to interpret the figures and guidance on their use. Educating the media in reporting and presenting statistics was also suggested as a strategy for avoiding misrepresentation. As in previous research (Duff *et al*, 1993), errors undermined public confidence and timely and transparent communication were seen as fundamental. These findings are consistent with the beliefs of Newton (2005a, 2005b), who identified media reports as the principal threat to public understanding of educational assessment, and argued that those responsible for educational assessment need to develop strategies to enhance public and professional understanding of assessment error.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Previous research into trust in public institutions (e.g. the government, the NHS, the police force) and their outputs are informative for anyone wishing to study trust in assessment. The extent to which loss of trust has spread into the area of assessment is yet to be measured. The politicisation of education and the increased scrutiny of examinations and examination standards in particular, warrant an investigation of trust in this area. Trust is fundamental to the operations of assessment agencies, as it has been shown to affect the way in which individuals engage with organisations. Quantitative measurements of trust used in other studies could be adapted for the field of assessment. For example, the measurement of trust in official statistics

developed by the ONS, and the key drivers of trust in other public institutions could be used as a starting point for an exploration of the factors that influence trust in examinations and examination results.

Theoretical and empirical research has shown that lack of public trust is rooted in broader societal and cultural changes, such as a decline in deference to authority. Any study of trust in assessment must take into account these changes as well as incidents such as the 2002 results debacle and the recently announced independence of QCA from ministerial control. Such events are likely to be intrinsically linked to fluctuations in trust in assessment. Furthermore, trust exists on different levels. Individuals may, for example, trust examiners to mark examination papers, but not awarding bodies to deliver accurate and reliable examination results. Such distinctions have led O' Neill (2002) to conclude that a paradox exists where trust is concerned – *"we still constantly place trust in many of the institutions and professions we profess not to trust"* (p. 13).

Research into trust in assessment may point to ways in which high levels of public trust can be developed and sustained. Research into other public institutions has shown that communication and responding in a timely and open way to errors are important in ensuring public trust. It should be borne in mind, however, that certain types of accountability and transparency may do little to dispel distrust (O'Neill, 2002, 2005). For O'Neill (2005) an intelligent form of accountability in assessment would provide the public, parents and pupils with evidence which they can use to make an informed judgement about where to place and refuse trust in examinations. Deciding what this 'usable evidence' should be and how it should be presented is a difficult task for awarding bodies. In general, however, improving contact with the public, making (appropriate) information on assessment more widely available, and educating the public and the media in the uses that assessment outputs can be put to seem likely to cultivate trust in the future.

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