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Why and how public trust matters

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ESSAY

Public Trust

Why and How Public Trust Matters

To build high trust cities, governments need to better understand the relationships linking people, leaders and the cities they inhabit. Behavioural scientist Professor **David Chan** explains the psychology of public trust.

City planning in Singapore is admired by many for its efficiency and effectiveness in creating well-integrated infrastructures and urban solutions for diverse people. For many years, people in Singapore have experienced and enjoyed a liveable city and a harmonious society.

With rapid changes in technology, data, population composition and socio-political mindsets, the challenge is for Singapore, a city-state, to continue to thrive as both a global city and a cohesive country—an urban future where people will enjoy a sustained and sustainable good quality of life at the individual and community levels.

As is the case for other cities, a people-centric approach is critical to designing and implementing urban solutions that work effectively for Singapore.

The key in a people-centric approach is understanding how people think, feel and act in various contexts, so that city leaders, planners, developers, practitioners, allied professionals and communities can co-create a city that is highly liveable, inclusive, cohesive, sustainable and resilient for its individuals and communities.

In this regard, Singapore has been tapping on the behavioural sciences to help develop solutions that will enhance the quality of life for individuals and communities. One area that has received increasing attention is understanding the multifaceted nature of "public trust", which Singapore city leaders now recognise as critical in policymaking and urban solutions.

Left to right: The Kuang Chee Tng Temple, Moulmein Church of Christ and Sathya Sai Baba Centre stand side by side along Moulmein Road.

URBAN SOLUTIONS

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Note: This essay is adapted from Chapter 2 of the book entitled Public Trust in Singapore, edited by David Chan and published in 2018 by World Scientific.

> ## "It is really the trust perceptions that matter."

Public trust has always been important for cities. Governments and city leaders care about trust because it is extremely difficult to attract investors and developers, start a business, pass legislation, implement an initiative or manage a crisis in an environment where trust is low.

Although leaders pay significant attention to the economics and politics of public trust, they often neglect its social-psychological dimensions.

It is important to contextualise trust in terms of the specific issue, the situation, the population and population segment, and the time period. A frequent problem in public discourse and internal deliberations is that public trust is talked about in the abstract without specifying the context.

We can contextualise the discussion of trust in terms of what I have called the 3Ms of trust matters: Trust is multi-level, trust is multi-dimensional, and trust is malleable.

Trust is Multi-Level

Trust is multi-level. It is important to recognise the different aspects of trust at different levels.

The individual level is fundamental because trust is a psychological construct and it is really the trust perceptions that matter. A trustee may be objectively trustworthy but if the trustor does not perceive the trustee as trustworthy, then there will still be low trust. The level of distrust affects how the trustor thinks, feels and acts, which in turn could lead to important individual and collective actions or reactions.

Trust can also occur at the team or group level. Do you trust your city leaders? When you answer this question, you are thinking of

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the city leaders as a team without necessarily thinking of any particular individual leader. But it may take just one individual leader in the team to behave in a certain way to increase or decrease your level of trust for the city leaders as a team.

At the team or group level, we can examine inter-team trust or inter-group trust. In Singapore, we often talk about social cohesion and harmony in terms of trust between groups, such as between different race groups or religious groups. The varieties of groups are important, and city leaders need to pay attention to other emergent group differences, such as trust between locals and foreigners, or between other emergent groups categorised according to variables like age or socio-economic class demographics. For example, when creating public spaces or amenities in Singapore, urban planners explicitly consider how this can be done in ways that will facilitate interactions among diverse groups of people living in Singapore.

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There is also public trust at the level of institutions and the government. When we talk about public trust in Singapore, we often refer to trust in the Singapore Government, and specific public institutions such as the enforcement agencies. Although this notion of public trust is clear in terms of the trustee, the issues are complex, such as which dimensions of trust are in question and how they are related. This brings us to the concept of multi-dimensionality, which is the second M of trust matters.

Trust is Multi-Dimensional

Trust is multi-dimensional, for both parties (the trustor and the trustee) in the trust relationship.

A citizen's propensity to trust their government depends on his or her beliefs, expectations and perceptions about the government. This subjectivity in the citizen is partly dependent on, but may sometimes be quite independent of, the government's objective trustworthiness. This is because not only the government's objective trustworthiness is sometimes not evident to

the citizen due to lack of access to relevant information, the citizen may have been misled to believe that some falsehoods or inaccuracies are factually true. This is particularly relevant in current times, with many describing the environment we live in as a "post-truth" world where falsehoods can be propagated rapidly and widely through cyberspace to severely and effectively erode public trust.

The issues involved, however, are not simple. Correcting false beliefs, for example, involves more than just calling out falsehoods as fake news and denouncing them. If citizens believe that what the government calls fake news is indeed the truth, then the more the government "attacks" the fake news without thinking through how to address citizens' beliefs, the more they would not trust the government, because they think the government is attacking the truth. The government therefore needs to work on how to effectively point out what or which part of the news is the falsehood and what the facts are. The news could be information or allegations about an infrastructure, an urban policy content or a smart nation initiative.

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01   Attendees gather at Pink Dot SG to show their support for the LGBTQ community.

02   The young and old come together to partake in intergenerational activities.

> **Trust in benevolence will increase as people see evidence that the Government says what it means and means what it says.**

Trust also comes with the public having certain expectations, in terms of expecting what the government will or will not do. An example is the public's expectation to be consulted when designing or implementing certain policies. When this expectation is not met, it leads to negative emotions, perceptions or even retaliatory actions.

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.

In the case of city governments, trust in competence refers to the public's confidence in governing bodies to perform and solve problems affecting people's lives, such as those relating to infrastructure, public transport and the delivery of public services. It involves the ability to address issues affecting quality of life, and also the effectiveness in managing crises.

Trust in integrity has to do with the public's perception of the government's character, and involves issues of honesty, incorruptibility and impartiality. The focus here is on the integrity of public service officers and political leaders but it also involves the perception of how breaches of integrity are handled. In Singapore, the Government's vigorous action against those caught for corruption, regardless of who they are, may mitigate the erosion of trust due to integrity breaches to some extent and reinforce the Government's position on zero tolerance for such wrongdoings.

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. Trust in benevolence increases when people believe that the intention of policy and government action is to serve their interests and is motivated by genuine concern for citizen well-being, as opposed to being influenced by vested private or partisan interests. It gets eroded when people think that policies are formulated by an elite disconnected from ground sentiments, is unable to empathise, or does not care enough for the less fortunate or ordinary folk.

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01 Military personnel from the Singapore Armed Forces distributing N95 masks to the public during the 2013 Southeast Asian haze crisis.

02 Workers conduct repair works on the Mass Rapid Transit tracks during the night to ensure smooth commuter services during peak hours.
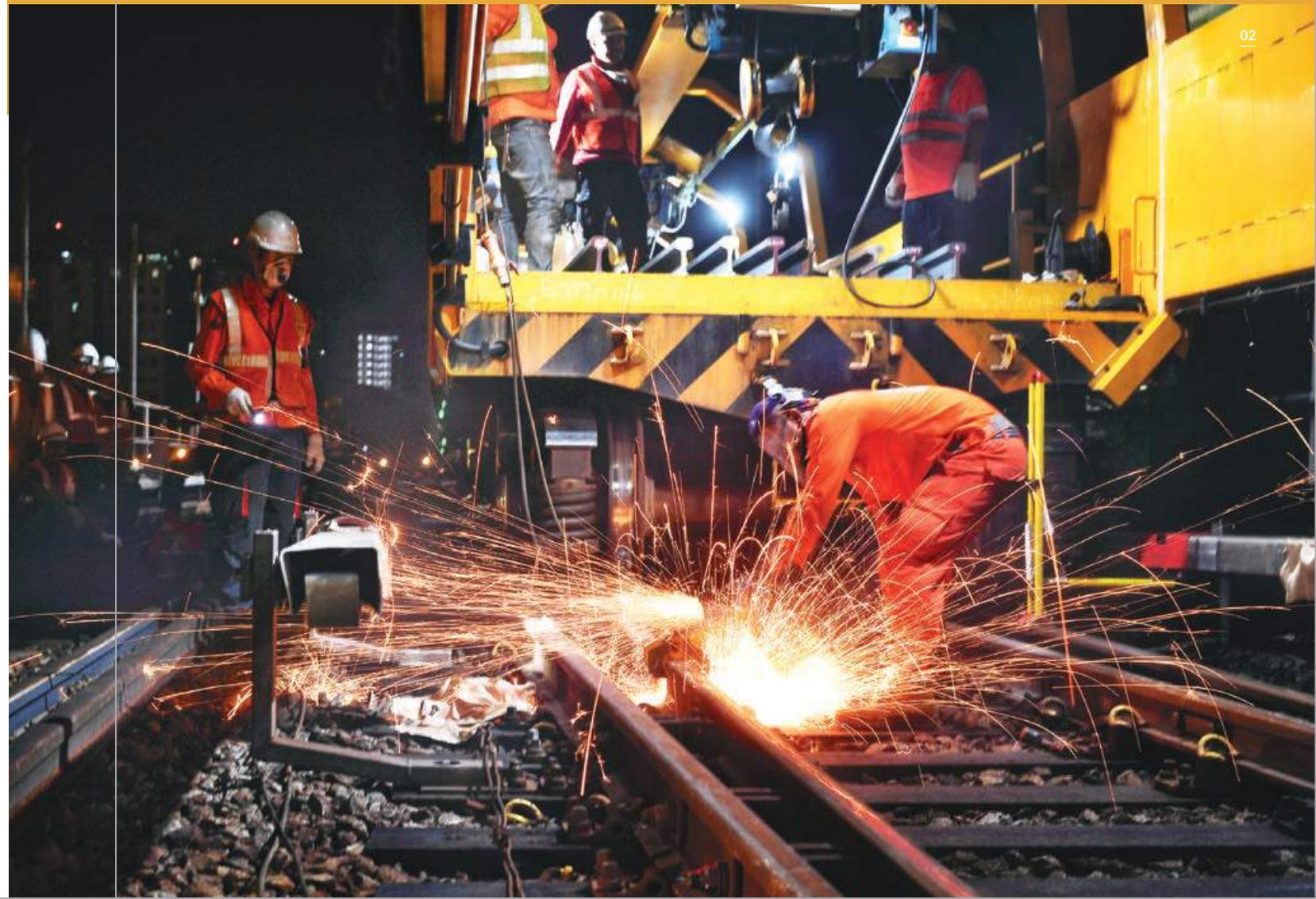
Trust in benevolence is one of the hardest forms of trust to gain, and one that means a lot to the public but is often neglected by governments. Often, the problem may not be that the government is actually not sincere, but that it is not perceived as sincere because it has not paid adequate attention to the nature of its actions, engagement and communications.

In the case of the Singapore Government, there has been increasing emphasis on citizen well-being, social mobility, quality of public engagement efforts and humility and empathy in public service. There are also significant policy shifts in urban planning, housing, health and education, where the policy content is more explicitly focused on citizens' immediate concerns as well as their longer-term interests and both policy design and implementation were preceded by extensive consultation and engagement with the public. If these emphases and policy shifts are sustainable and translated into intended outcomes that benefit citizens, trust in benevolence will increase as people see evidence that the Government says what it means and means what it says.

Trust is Malleable

Trust is malleable, which simply means it can change. This may sound obvious, but many often fail to appreciate its implications.

Trust takes time to build, is easy to lose, and once lost it is difficult to restore. When we understand what this statement really means, we will find trust so precious and we will appreciate why we cannot take trust for granted. We will also realise that trust erosion is easy and trust repair is difficult. The point is not to lament on the fragility of trust but to understand what it means for trust building since trust can change.

The first step is to know that trust is dynamic and sensitive to the context. A trust level at

> **"Trust takes time to build, is easy to lose, and once lost it is difficult to restore."**

any one point in time must never be taken as fixed or a given. The level of trust can change gradually or abruptly, and it may increase or decrease depending on the prevailing factors that impact on trust, thereby producing a pattern or change trajectory over time.

The dynamic nature of trust is why it is very difficult to predict future levels of public trust based on historical trends. For example, you could have trusted the Government for the past 20 years, but if it does something now that really violates your values, you may stop trusting it.

Trust need not change gradually—it can move rapidly and abruptly depending on changes in context. Therefore, leaders need to be careful when making decisions and policies based on trends and projections. The overdependence on past trends is probably underestimated by many city leaders. Trust levels in previous years may give the leader some relevant context and data reference. But what happens in the next year depends a lot on what the leaders do this year, and what the people are perceiving about the leaders.

The limitation of using past trends of trust levels to predict current and future levels of trust must not be confused with the separate issue of changes in the people's lived experiences over time. The pattern of these changes is critical in influencing trust levels. When citizens go to vote at the ballot box or when they decide how to respond to city leaders on an issue, they do not care where Singapore stands in a global ranking of country trust levels. They care where their well-being stands today as compared to the past few years of their lives.

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It is the lived experiences that the people go through that will determine their trust levels and their reactions, in both attitudes and actions. So, it is intra-individual and intra-country/city changes in trust levels, and not inter-country/city ranking, that is most important for the politicians and city leaders to bear in mind.

In sum, trust is neither random nor predetermined; trust levels can be predicted to some extent and they can be enhanced. We need to go beyond the trust score at any one point in time and understand that trust is a process. That means understanding the science of trust and translating it to practice to deal with trust erosion, trust repair and trust development.

Evidence-Based Approach to Building Trust

To increase trust, the first step is to understand that trust is a psychological perception that is complex and critical. An evidence-based approach to trust is essential.

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 including how and why it changes, prevent its erosion and find ways to enhance it in society.

The practical purpose of studying public trust in a country or city is to increase trust between people and the government and between different groups within the community or society. There are two goals: increasing actual trustworthiness of trustees and increasing trustors' trust perceptions of trustees. Actual trustworthiness of trustees should logically lead to increased trustors' trust perceptions of trustees. However, the research literature has shown that trustors' trust perceptions are frequently misaligned with trustees' actual trustworthiness. Therefore, a research roadmap needs to assess and address both.

To understand trust, we need to appreciate its fragility and power. ⊙

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01   A sign informing consumers of a price increase in cold beverages at a hawker stall.