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How the Impressionable Years, Detrimental Events and Collective Experiences Shape Social Trust

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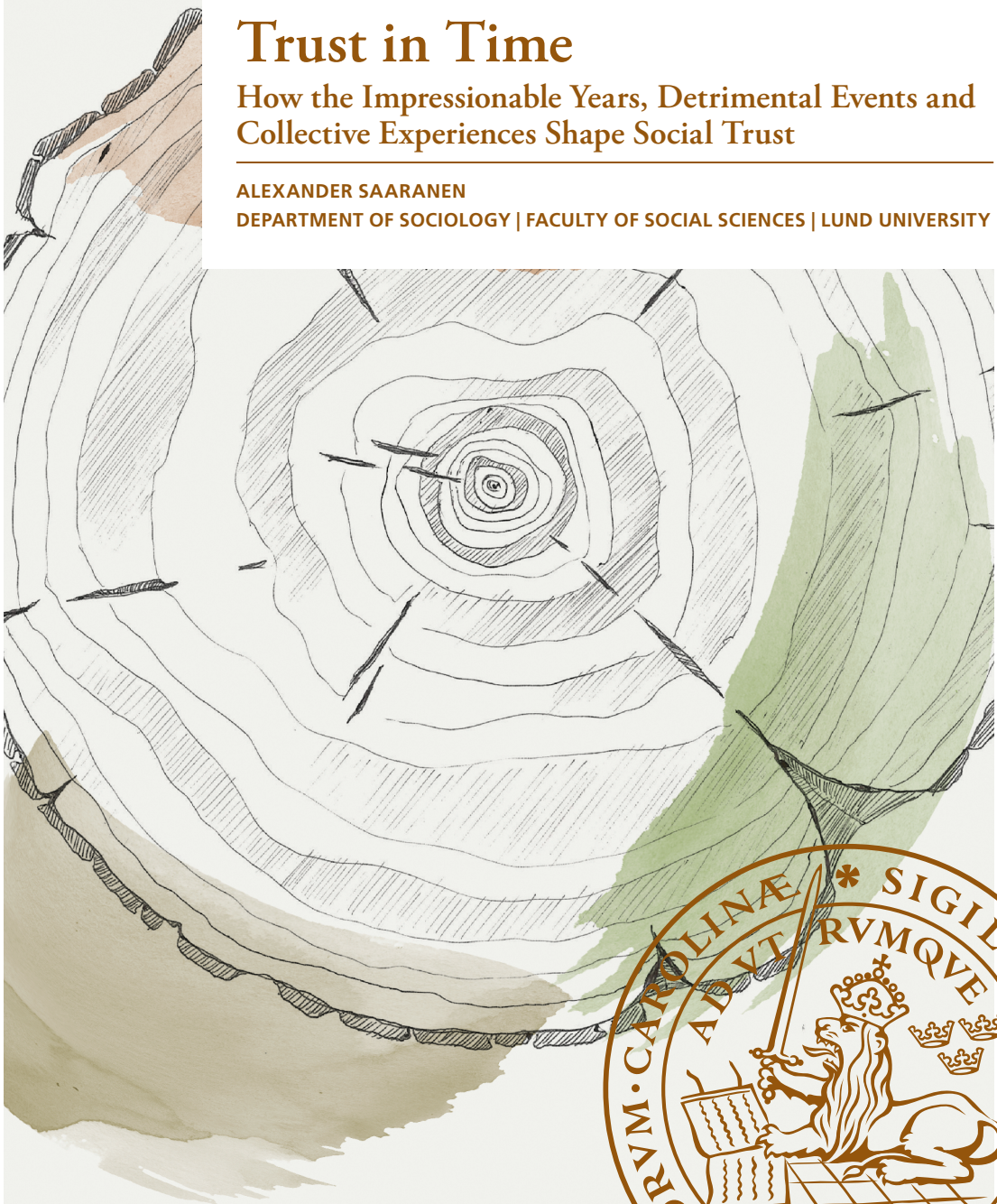

Trust in Time

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How the Impressionable Years, Detrimental Events and Collective Experiences Shape Social Trust

Alexander Saaranen

LUND
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
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Abstract:

This dissertation is a compilation thesis comprised of three individual research articles that explore whether and how the impressionable years, detrimental events and collective crises predict social trust – the belief that most people can be trusted. Despite the widespread scholarly interest in social trust, most previous research in the formation of social trust over the life-course is based on data from adults. While the relevant existing studies place emphasis on social trust's durability and resistance to change, surprisingly few studies have examined if this holds true during adolescence and early adulthood. Specific attention is thus paid to the question how social trust develops from adolescence to early adulthood and beyond. Empirically, the thesis' main data come from the Swiss Household Panel study, which, crucially, includes respondents from the year they turn 14, thus making it possible to analyse the development of individual-level social trust from early teenagerhood throughout adolescence and beyond. For comparatative purposes, the thesis also draw on cross-sectional survey data from the European Social Survey and the World Values Survey. Analysing stability and change in social trust during the COVID-19 pandemic, it finds that an exceptionally large share of respondents displayed a decline in social trust in spring 2020. However, in most cases, the earlier losses in trust recovered to pre-crisis levels shortly afterwards, thus lending support for the notion that people's social trust tend to fluctuate around a baseline set-point. Using a range of different quantitative modelling techniques, it is also found that social trust substantially declines at the onset of teenagerhood, a timeframe that also marks the beginning of a life-course period frequently refered to as the 'impressionable years'. Although people's social trust tend to gradually recover over the life span, it never fully recovers to the same levels displayed at the age of 14. Examining the scarring effect of negative experiences, it emphasizes that youth – but not adult – unemployment leaves lasting scars on people's social trust, well into adulthood. Those 'scars' are cumulative, as they go deeper with both the number and duration of unemployment experiences. Overall, the thesis challenges prevailing understandings and synthesis of the litterature on the so-called cultural perspective and the impressionable years.

Key words: Social trust, impressionable years, adolescence, cultural perspective, longitudinal

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Alexander Saaranen
Gothenburg, April 2025

List of Papers

Paper I

Saaranen, A. (2024). Social Trust during the Pandemic: Longitudinal evidence from three waves of the Swiss household panel study. *Journal of Trust Research*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2024.2385534

Paper II

Saaranen, A. (2025). Social Trust during the Impressionable Years and Beyond.

Paper III

Mewes, J. & Saaranen, A. (2025) Social Trust and the Scars of (Youth) Unemployment: Longitudinal Evidence from Switzerland, 2002-2022. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/cm8tv_v1

Author's contribution to the papers

Paper I
Solo authored

Paper II
Solo authored

Paper III
Co-authored together with Jan Mewes

Abbreviations

FE	Fixed-effects
FD	First Difference
SD	Standard Deviation
RE	Random-Effects
SHP	Swiss Household Panel
ESS	European Social Survey
WVS	World Values Survey

1 Introduction

Social trust is the belief that most people, including strangers, can be trusted (Stolle, 2002). On a very fundamental level, trust – and especially trust in strangers – have, repeatedly been linked to a wide range of normatively desirable benefits (Uslaner, 2018; Welch et al., 2005). On an individual-level, social trust has for example been linked to greater subjective well-being (Helliwell & Wang, 2010), (self-rated) health (Kawachi, 2018; Mewes & Giordano, 2017), social belonging (Kramer, 2018; Putnam, 2000) and increased overall life expectancy (Giordano et al., 2019). Similarly, on a macro-level previous research emphasize that high-trust societies are better off financially (Bjørnskov, 2012, 2022; Fukuyama, 1995), democratically (Letki, 2018; Newton, 2001) and less affected by issues like polarization (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2018; Vallier, 2020) and corruption (Richey, 2010; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005).

However, despite the considerable scholarly interest in social trust, surprisingly little is known about how and when it develops over the life span. Given that an important strand of research holds that social trust is developed before people reach adulthood (Uslaner, 2002), it is vital to study adolescents' change and stability in social trust. Previous research has shown that adolescence is a period when people's values, beliefs and morals are considered to be particularly malleable and susceptible to social influences (Birnbaum, 1974; Dinas, 2010).

My thesis thus focuses on the question as to whether social trust is susceptible to short- and long-term change. Specifically, I study how social trust develops between adolescence and adulthood, a life-course period often described as the 'impressionable years'. While the available evidence concerning trust during adolescence (Abdelzadeh & Lundberg, 2017; C. Flanagan et al., 2014; C. A. Flanagan & Stout, 2010; Wray-Lake & Flanagan, 2012), mostly draws on limited empirical comparisons between two different

points in time (so-called two-wave designs), I draw on much richer longitudinal data enabling me to track people's social trust annually over many survey waves and years. Compared to limited two-wave comparisons, this design allows me to discern whether any observable changes in individual-level social trust are a short-lived deviation or part of a more general long-term development.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The overarching aim of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how people's social trust develops over time, with a particular focus on the period between adolescence and (early) adulthood. Empirically, I draw on nationally representative survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), the European Social Survey (ESS), and the World Values Survey (WVS). Due to its longitudinal design and its inclusion of 14-year-old participants, the SHP survey will serve as the primary data source throughout the thesis, with the cross-sectional ESS and WVS providing information about broader age-related trends in social trust.

The main research questions driving my thesis are:

1. How does social trust develop between adolescence and (early) adulthood?
2. Which experiences determine changes in social trust?
3. How lasting are those changes?

1.2 Outline of the Dissertation

In this section, I will go through each chapter of the dissertation and provide a brief overview of every chapter and the main takeaways. Chapter 1 presents the spark that prompted the inspiration for my thesis. Structurally, I start with a brief introduction to social trust. I then outline the current knowledge gap and discuss why this need to be addressed to further the collectives understanding of trust.

In chapter 2, I highlight the historical evolution of scholarly interests in trust. Continuing with a detailed discussion of the two most prominent forms of trust, i.e. political trust and social trust (Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2018; Newton, 2001), I draw on previous research and explain important varieties in trust. I conceptualize the form of trust – generalized trust – that is most important for the thesis and discuss some of the normatively desirable benefits that come with higher stocks of generalized social trust.

In chapter 3, I discuss the two most influential theoretical perspectives on change vs stability in trust, i.e. the cultural perspective (Uslaner, 2002) and the experiential perspective (Glanville & Paxton, 2007). I then suggest to extend the binary distinction with insights from the set-point theory (Headey, 2008b), a framework that was originally developed to track the malleability of subjective well-being (Bruni & Porta, 2005; Lucas, 2007). Here, I draw on previous research suggesting that subjective well-being and trust share many similarities (Helliwell & Wang, 2010). Specifically, I argue that the 'set-point' theory has great potential to be used to understand change and stability in social trust.

Given my specific research focus on the development of trust between adolescence and early adulthood, I also draw on the impressionable years hypothesis (Birnbaum, 1974; Dinas, 2010), I further emphasize the generational aspect (Mannheim, 1970) as well as one's personal culture (Kiley & Vaisey, 2020). Lastly, I draw on life-course approaches (Elder et al., 2003) as a framework to study how individual level experiences (here: unemployment) and collective experiences (here: the recent COVID-19 pandemic) shape adolescents' and adults' social trust. Against this background, I dedicate special attention to key concepts like role-change, transitions, trajectories and turning points to contextualize the impact of important life choices and the factors that influence said choice during adolescence (Crosnoe, 2000; Elder, 1998; Laub & Sampson, 2006).

In chapter 4, I discuss the methodological framework of my thesis. I begin with a historical explanation of measuring social trust, followed by a discussion regarding the methodological challenges that comes with capturing such an elusive concept as trust (Henrich et al., 2010; Uslaner, 2015). Empirically, my most important data source is the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). The SHP is a nationally representative longitudinal panel study that

first included the general trust question in 2002 and annually ever since (Tillmann et al., 2022). Importantly, the SHP includes participants from the age of 14, thus making it possible to study changes in trust within the same individuals from the age of 14 of up to 36 years of age. In terms of research methods, I draw on diverse quantitative techniques, such as fixed-effects regression, random-effects regression, multinomial logistic regression and first-difference estimation (Andreß et al., 2013; Brüderl & Ludwig, 2015).

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the three studies that, taken together, represent the thesis' empirical work. The three studies are entitled:

1. Saaranen, A. (2024). "Social Trust During the Pandemic: Longitudinal Evidence from Three Waves of the Swiss Household Panel Study". *Journal of Trust Research, 14(2), 188-212.*
2. Saaranen, A. (2025) "*Social Trust During the Impressionable Years and Beyond*".
3. Mewes, J., & Saaranen, A. (2025) "*Social Trust and the Scars of (Youth) Unemployment: Longitudinal Evidence from Switzerland, 2002-2022*".

Chapter 6 reviews the main research questions of my thesis, e.g. '*How does social trust develop between adolescence and (early) adulthood?*', '*Which experiences determine changes in social trust?*' and '*How lasting are those changes?*' Grounded in the research questions, I then discuss the thesis conclusions, limitations and recommendations for future research.

1.3 Previous Research

There is a distinct lack of research on adolescents' trust, and there is an even greater lack of longitudinal research making use of more than two repeated measures. Previous research on adolescents' trust is often limited by the fact that it fails to follow-up young people into early adulthood and beyond. While empirically limited, some of these studies have provided insight into the dynamics that shape social trust during adolescence.

For example, studying the development of social trust during adolescence using two-wave panel data gathered over a two-year period, Flanagan and Stout (2010) find that social trust decreases between early (11-13), middle (13-15) and later (15-17) adolescence in a sample of American teenagers. They study also highlights how feelings of school- and student solidarity positively determine social trust, thus pointing to the necessity of functioning and inclusive schools that nurture feelings of solidary amongst their students.

Using longitudinal survey data from five difference cohort between the ages of 13-15, 16-18, 20-22, 22-24 and 26-28, Abdelzadeh and Lundberg (2017) study the malleability of social trust from early adolescence to young adulthood in a panel study among pupils from the city of Örebro in Sweden. Their findings suggests that social trust is relatively 'shaky' during the early stages of adolescence but that it gradually stabilizes as they come of age. Importantly, the authors (2017, p. 222) argue that "our findings point to the significance of the impressionable-years hypothesis for understanding the development of adolescents' social trust".

The impressionable years' hypothesis states that the development from adolescent to early adulthood is characterized by substantial change in people's values, attitudes and beliefs (Birnbaum, 1974; Dinas, 2010), making it an important theoretical backdrop for my thesis (see chapter 3 for a more detailed description).

My research also takes inspiration from a study by Poulin and Haase (2015). Examining how social trust develops over the life course, using time-series data from the World Values Survey (WVS), they find cross-sectional evidence for the hypothesis that trust increases with age, from adolescence to old age. Even though the authors include respondents from the age of 14, the adolescents' data suffers from a small-n problem[1] and a selection bias[2]. My

[1] The total number of 14-year-old participants in Poulin and Haase's (2015) data is n = 12, and while the sample size gets somewhat bigger for the ages 15 to 17, the total number of < 18-year-olds remains extremely low.

[2] The WVS covers close to 100 countries which together contains roughly 90 percent of the world's population, making it (at the time of writing) the largest non-commercial, cross-sectional, time series exploration of beliefs and values (Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2000). Sample-wise, the WVS require most participating nations to include at least 1200 survey participants to assure that the sample is nationally representative and minimise error effects. Once the 1200 participants per nation requirement is achieved, the local country-specific studies can *opt* to include participants below the age of 18. This means

thesis will thus use large-scale household panel data to scrutinize the relationship between ageing and social trust among adolescents on a more solid basis.

In addition to research on the relationship between adolescents and trust, I draw inspiration from previous studies interested in understanding how the latter is affected by collective experiences (e.g. natural disasters, pandemics and other kinds of crises). Comparing trust and happiness before and after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, Yamamura et al., (2015) find, for instance, that disasters seems to have had a negative impact on people's social trust, a result that the authors attribute to societal upheaval and increased sense of vulnerability. Importantly, their study also shows that young people's trust was particularly affected by the crisis. However, Yamamura et al., (2015)'s data only covers respondents from 20 years old and over, thus omitting adolescents.

Investigating whether exposure to the Spanish Flu influenced social trust across different generations of immigrants in the United States and combining time-series data from the American General Social Survey (GSS) with macro-level data on immigration and mortality rates of the Spanish Flu in various countries across the globe, Aassve et al., (2021) find that the near 100 year old pandemic had devastating long-term effects of social trust. Importantly, low levels of trust were passed on to descendants of the survivors of the Spanish Flue who migrated to the US.

Before delving into the finer details of the thesis, let's take a step back and examine the broader framework of trust, the underlying principles and how they shape people's understanding conceptual framing of trust.

that while not all countries are able to include respondents under the age of 18, some of them end up including participants that are younger, albeit at a more limited scale.

2 The Nuances of Trust

"Trust is the belief that someone is good and honest, and will not try to harm you, or that something is safe and reliable" (Turner, 2006). This Cambridge dictionary's definition of trust holds remarkable resemblance to the perspective of rational choice theorists' definition of trust (Hardin, 1993). In simple terms and from a rational choice point of view, trust is viewed as a three-way relationship where A trusts B to do X (Cook & Santana, 2018). While this three-way relationship certainly exists, especially in everyday commerce, the three-way relationship cannot adequately be used to understand trust behaviour in times of collective challenges, nor does it enable the building of social bonds with people who are unlike us.

Anthony Giddens defines trust as "the vestige of confidence in persons or in abstract systems, made on the basis of a 'leap into faith' which brackets ignorance or lack of information" (1991, p. 249). More specifically, he distinguishes three variants of trust, namely basic, active, and passive trust. Giddens argues that basic trust (Erikson, 1963), determined by the care and love of one's primary caretakes during early childhood, functions as a form of 'starter trust' for all people. According to Giddens, passive trust is the kind of trust that individuals place in pillar institutions or abstract systems (such as government, financial institutions or technically advanced systems), that they may not fully understand or interact with on a personal level. Passive trust is often contrasted with active trust, which concerns a person's direct and personal relationship that encourage active engagement by the trustor to continuously assess the reliability of the other trusted party. A contemporary example of the difference between active and passive trust could be the trust people have in a specific journalist vs the trust people have to "news" on social media platforms.

Eric M. Uslaner (2002, p. 1) defines social trust as the belief that most people can be trusted. According to him, trust constitutes "the chicken soup of social

life. It brings us all sorts of good things, from a willingness to get involved in our communities to higher rates of economic growth and, ultimately, to satisfaction with government performance". While I sympathize with Uslaner's definition of trust, it highlights some challenges of conceptualizing trust as a single entity due to the sheer width and depth with which trust shapes and is shaped by people, communities and societies. In the next section, I will therefore discuss the varieties of trust in more detail.

2.1 Varieties of Trust

Having established that I view trust as an umbrella term containing several layers of more specific forms of trust, I delve deeper into the different varieties of trust, highlighting those that are relevant for my research. The scholarly literature is particularly interested in two forms of trust: political trust and social trust. From a historical perspective, social trust is the 'new kid on the block', whereas political trust has a rich history of being viewed as an essential asset for successful governance. In fact, the relevance of political trust can be tracked back all the way back to Confucius, who stated that one's ability to rule "rests on the foundations of weapons, food, and trust", roughly 2500 years ago (Newton et al., 2018, p. 37).

The importance of social trust was not recognized until the nineteenth century. It was especially advocates of liberal democracy such as Tocqueville (Mill, 1859) that spurred the growing interest in social trust. Social trust is therefore closely connected to political trust and could not have emerged as a scholarly relevant variant of trust without the rise of democratic states, and perhaps more importantly, democratic believes. This argument is grounded in the realization that to run an efficient democratic government, one cannot simply rely on the consent of the governed but is also dependent on citizens' ability to cooperate and work together. Although many prominent sociological classics (e.g. Comte, Durkheim and Simmel) touch upon questions of trust and solidarity their focus point gravitates around self-interested people and their ability to form cooperative communities (Durkheim & Giddens, 1986). It was only after the second half of the 20th century (Almond & Verba, 1963) that scholars such as Luhmann (2018), Sztompka (1998, 1999), Putnam (2000),

Giddens (1986; 1991) and Uslaner (2002) began to truly disentangle social trust from political trust.

Nowadays, political trust and social trust each constitute their own (yet related) research fields, with each of them being heavily linked to their corresponding fields within the social sciences. It should come as no great surprise that political science is particularly interested in political trust, whereas sociology (and to a certain extent psychology) tends to be more interested in social trust. While focusing on social trust, omitting the political side of trust from my research would be ill advice, as previous research suggests that political actions can influence social trust (see the first study of the thesis, "*Social Trust During the Pandemic*").

2.1.1 The Social Side of Trust

Scholarly research tends to distinguish between three forms of social trust (Table 1).

Table 1. Varieties of Social Trust.

Version	*Scope*	*Trust Formula*
Particularized	Trust in specific groups	A trusts B if B belongs to C
Personalized	Trust in specific individuals	A trusts B
Generalized	Trust in most people	A trusts

Firstly, *particularized trust* refers to trust in people that are believed to be similar. Typical examples are trust toward 'in-groups' sharing the same ethnicity or religious belonging to (Fukuyama, 1995). Too much particularization has been linked to negative outcomes, such as the sorting of 'us' vs. 'them' (Durkheim & Giddens, 1986), solidifying the trust status of one's own social sphere while alienating anyone not part of that group. For instance, Vallier (2020) argues that one of the driving factors for increasing polarization in the United States is that increasing particularization within

political faction essentially isolates people within their respective political groups, rendering dialog and progress unobtainable as anything the 'other side' says would simply be considered untrustworthy.

Personalized trust refers to trust in known others (Kramer, 2018), e.g. family members, friends, colleagues, neighbours and partners. Personalized trust is thus intertwined with the individual qualities of the person and as such it may change quite rapidly depending on the person's action. Personalized trust is therefore crucial for close-knit relationships: making this version of trust very important for maintaining social connections. For example, you may have high personalized trust in a close friend or family member, knowing them well enough to rely on them for emotional support. However, you would probably not extend the same level of trust towards someone else that you do not know personally. That said, due to the narrow scope of personalized trust, it does not have the same broader social benefits as the third version of social trust, i.e. generalized trust.

Generalized trust encompasses, thirdly, trust in unspecified others – including, strangers (Stolle, 2002). Generalized trust ought to be viewed as a thin interpersonal form of trust that people have towards the broader unknown mass of society (Uslaner, 2002). In contrast to the two former types of social trust, generalized trust is not tied to any specific group- and/or individual characteristics but is instead akin to a general belief about most other people. For instance, if someone has high levels of generalized trust, they are more likely to believe that strangers (e.g. someone they randomly interact with or meet on the street etcetera) will behave in a trustworthy and honest manner. Generalized trust is by far the most researched form of social trust, with an increasing body of literature showing that higher rates of generalized trust correlate with a wide range of normatively desirable benefits. Due to the extensive interest in generalized trust as a research subject, it is common praxis amongst trust invested researchers (me included) to consider the term 'social trust' as synonymous with generalized trust. Thus, to avoid any confusion for the readers of this thesis going forward, I use the terms "social trust" and "generalized trust" interchangeably unless, of course, I specify otherwise.

2.1.2 The Political Side of Trust

Scholarly research tends to differentiate between three forms of political trust.

Firstly, trust in the current establishment of political power, including continuous evaluation of current political actors, parties and on-going policies (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2018; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). The first form, as the definition entails, is heavily influenced by the current political landscape and as such, it is believed that this version of political trust is rather malleable and depending on the current political context (Hooghe, 2018; Letki, 2018). Consequently, this form of political trust can undergo changes quite rapidly, especially if the political landscape is tainted by unrest or other unstable elements. Here the political actors are considered the main drivers of political trust, with elections usually serving as a platform to reinforce and enhance political engagement and trust. Notably, voters for the winners of elections are usually more likely to show increases in political trust and, unsurprisingly, losers are likely to experience a decline (Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2018).

The second form of political trust is the trust that we have towards neutral independent institutions of the state, such as law enforcement, healthcare and the justice system (Becker, 1984). This form of trust is often referred to as 'institutional trust' (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

The third and last highlighted form of political trust is tied to international relations where multiple countries form military alliances, international courts and global or supranational organisations (Rathbun, 2018). This form of trust is heavily influenced by the political system in the home country. Although it can fluctuate in the short-term, it is generally quite stable, and changes are less dramatic when compared with trust in domestic politics and politicians. Out of the three highlighted forms of political trust, it is mainly institutional trust and trust in domestic politics and politicians that have been found to determine social trust.

Interestingly, the scholarly literature points to several ways how political trust can cause, or influence, *social trust*, with an important strand of literature (Fukuyama, 2017; Putnam et al., 1994; Rothstein, 2005; Uslaner, 2002), supporting for the notion that citizens who have greater trust in their political institutions tend to perceive the entire social system as fairer and more predictable. This belief is then assumed to have 'trickle down' effects regarding trust in other people in general. For instance, Rothstein (2005) finds

that citizens who trust in their political institutions are more likely to trust their fellow citizens. Specifically, Rothstein (2005) argues that greater trust in the political systems, their fairness and functioning may set a precedent that creates an environment where people feel more confident engaging with others, even those they consider to be strangers. Granted, this whole idea relies on the fairness of the political system, so negative developments like corruption have a negative effect whereas openness and perceived fairness has a positive effect (Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein & Eek, 2009). Studying the effects of institutional performance and trust in others, Putnam et al., (1994) also find that when governments perform as they should (e.g. provide public good, reduce corruption and maintain the rule of law etcetera) they signal that cooperation is beneficial to the population, leading to an increase in collective efficiency, social harmony and, eventually, social trust. When discussing the relationship between social and political trust Uslaner (2002), argues that there is an element of social learning at play. For instance, in political systems where citizens perceive that their government responds to their needs and acts transparently, people are more likely to trust others. Similarly, Fukuyama (2017) highlights that political stability increases social cohesion, leading to a society where individuals feel safer and more willing to engage in social exchanges. Stability can, according to Fukuyama (2017), therefore reduce the fear of exploitation and increase confidence in social interaction which in turn fosters social trust.

2.2 The Benefits of Social Trust

Social trust comes with a wide range of normatively desirable benefits on the micro-, meso-, and macro-level of societies (Nannestad, 2008; Robbins, 2016; Schilke et al., 2021). *Social capital* can be understood as the value that social networks provide to individuals and communities which facilitates cooperation and collective action (Coleman, 1988). Social trust is, following this definition, closely connected to social capital (Bourdieu, 2011; Coleman, 1988; Newton, 2001; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Zangger, 2023). In fact, these two concepts are so closely interconnected theoretically that in contemporary literature social trust is often considered an extended form of social capital, or, at the

very least, the attitudinal dimension of social capital (Sturgis et al., 2010). The relationship between social trust and social capital is often viewed as a dynamic and reciprocal one, where social capital fosters social trust by creating environments where cooperation is the norm (Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 2001; Putnam, 2000), and social trust in turn encourages the development of social capital by promoting collective action and facilitating the building of networks (Coleman, 1988; Putnam et al., 1994; Uslaner, 2002). The two concepts feed into each other, enhancing one another and contributing to more socially efficient and cohesive communities. It should therefore come as no surprise that the relationship between trust and social capital is of vital importance in the scholarly literature.

Studying divorce rates and social trust, Brinig (2011) links for example social trust to social capital and argues that people's trust on a general level, influences collective action, and, more importantly, increases people's sense of belonging on a collective- as well as more intimate-level. People who live in high-trust environments have therefore higher levels of social capital, resulting in lower divorce rates. Roderick M. Kramer (2018) also highlights the association between sense of belonging and social trust, hypothesizing that trust, viewed from an aggregated perspective, play a crucial role in improving inter-group relations. Trust thus enhances people's sense of belonging on a community level and per extension their ability to come together when collective action is required. Moreover, the security that comes with increased sense of community improves the quality of people's relationships.

Social trust also seems to positively influence people's subjective- and physical well-being (Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022; Helliwell et al., 2018; Helliwell & Wang, 2010; Poulin & Haase, 2015). Using Canadian survey data, Helliwell and Wang (2010) find for instance that social trust predicts subjective well-being. In a more recent study, Helliwell et al., (2018) underscores that other variations of trust, such as trust in politicians or prominent societal institutions, also influence subjective well-being, however, not nearly as strong as social trust. Social trust can, according to Helliwell et al., (2018), thus reduce the subjective damage to well-being from discriminatory actions and/or unfortunate events and circumstances; "Those who have high social trust are less likely to interpret past or present actions as discriminatory or anticipate future discrimination. And they are also more likely, given their high social

trust, to think that others will lend a hand to stop discriminatory actions by others. Thus we would hypothesize that those with higher social trust would face a significantly smaller well-being cost from being a member of a group that they think has been subjected to discrimination" (Helliwell et al., 2018, p. 423).

The physical health-related benefits of social trust have primarily revolved around the elderly, the extended life expectancy amongst high-trusters and the mortality rates. In studies on social trust's benefits for physical health, scholars' often treat trust as a binary concept, comparing the health outcomes of trusting vs. 'cautious' distrusting people. One of the main takeaways from those studies is that mistrusting people have, on average, an "elevated risk of developing coronary heart disease and/or dying prematurely, even after controlling for differences in other health risk factors" (Kawachi, 2018, p. 447). Specifically, people with high social trust are less influenced by negative emotions that cause physiological stress resulting in higher blood pressure that may eventually lead to coronary atherosclerosis (Subramanian et al., 2002). Examining trust and all-cause mortality in the US, Giordano et al., (2019) finds that environmental and individual-level social trust positively impacts longevity, even after controlling for expected individual- and contextual-level determinants of health (e.g. age, race, gender, marital status, education and income). Thus, trust and health seem to be intertwined, which amongst the elderly population can result in a slightly skewed age-bias in trust as the individuals with higher degrees of social trust live longer on average. This has caused some researchers to argue that trust increases with age, in particular amongst the elderly (Poulin & Haase, 2015) whereas it might just be that the more trusting population live longer which pushes the average trust rates higher amongst the elderly.

People's trust in unknown others also has positive macro level influences. For example, Newton (2001) writes that "social and political capital refer to the aggregate properties of societies and polities, not to their individual members. One can estimate the stock of social and political capital by averaging individual scores for a society as a whole, in the same way as GNP refers to whole nations or regions" (2001, p. 212). Here, Newton underscores the positive influences of social trust on an aggregated level and argues that, "nations with little social capital will find it difficult to build political capital,

countries with well-developed social capital will find it easier to re-create high levels of political capital while their social capital remains high" (2001, p. 212). Thus, while in a slightly more nuanced view, Newton highlights the importance of aggregated social trust and democratic foundations. In a more recent study, Letki (2018) examines how social- and political trust behave in newly defined democratic regimes. Although Letki is more interested in the dynamics that may break trust (e.g. high levels of corruption, unequal socioeconomic standards and ethnic conflict), she finds that while trust is not a necessary condition for democratization, countries with lower levels of trust, are far more susceptible to so-called 'democratic backsliding' and other negative influences, like corruption and polarization.

Trusting societies have also been found to be more financially efficient. It is easy to imagine the social barriers that would exist if people were not able to trust others. Trade would be non-existent or at least reduced to a minimal state. Touching upon the link between trust and financial efficiency, Fukuyama (1995) explores the various roles that trust plays different in the economic and social systems across the globe. Drawing in examples from diverse countries such as the United States, Japan, Italy, France, China, he concludes that, regardless of cultural difference in its interpretation, trust positively influences businesses. For example, Fukuyama argues that low-trusting societies are adept at forming smaller family businesses that may become very successful over time, but they are not very effective in creating large-scale enterprises because that requires a high-trust society. Looking towards the uncertain future, Fukuyama further emphasizes that "when the information age's most enthusiastic apostles celebrate the breakdown of hierarchy and authority, they neglect one critical factor: trust, and the shared ethical norms that underlie it" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 25).

Christian Bjørnskov (2012, 2018, 2022) is another trust scholar who has dedicated much of his research studying whether and how social trust affects economic growth. In one of his recent studies, Bjørnskov (2022) suggests that social trust increases factor accumulation and productivity improvements. This is an interesting take, as prior research hints that trust not only influences accumulation of wealth but also physical and human capital (Fukuyama, 1995). Thus, Bjørnskov's findings indicate that social trust significantly

influences long-run growth by improving the productivity/efficiency of society.

The last two benefits of social trust that I would like to highlight deal with its capacity to improve societies' resilience against negative trends such as polarization (Rapp, 2016; Vallier, 2019, 2020) and corruption (Richey, 2010; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; You, 2018). I find Carolin Rapp's (2016) research on the influence of moral opinions and the erosion of social trust to be particularly interesting. Using the World Values Survey (WVS) to study countries where polarization over 'morally charged issues' (e.g. exemplified by abortion, homosexuality and euthanasia) was frequent and to ascertain the influence that this had on social trust within each corresponding country, Rapp's findings indicate that people who live in countries with comparably morally charged and polarized communities, are less trusting than those from comparably less morally charged environments. A recent study by Torcal and Thomson (2023) comes to similar conclusions, suggesting that polarization, and particularly affective polarization, negatively impacts social trust. However, other recent evidence also suggests a reverse relationship where societies with higher degrees of social trust are less susceptible to the negative influences that come with affective polarization (Vallier, 2019, 2020). Nurturing trust can thus be viewed as a way to counteract the increasingly widespread phenomenon of polarization.

Having introduced and discussed various normatively desirable benefits associated with social trust, the next section deals with a theoretical discussion about where social trust comes from and how stable it is within individuals.

3 Theorizing Trust

This chapter delve deeper into the theoretical perspectives concerning the development of social trust. In doing so, I review what the current literature regard as the origins of trust and whether it can change over people's life span.

3.1 The Experiential Perspective

The *active updating model*, or as it is more commonly known as, the *experiential perspective*, argues that experiences continuously shape people's social trust throughout their entire life course (Glanville & Paxton, 2007). The experiential perspective thus suggests that social trust is malleable throughout people's entire lives (Dinesen & Bekkers, 2017; Lersch, 2023).

Evidence in favour of the active updating model has been found when researching civic life involvement (Delhey & Newton, 2003; Dinesen & Bekkers, 2017), victimization (Kumove, 2023), unemployment (Laurence, 2015; Mewes et al., 2021), self-rated health (Giordano et al., 2019; Mewes & Giordano, 2017; Subramanian et al., 2002), subjective well-being (Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022; Helliwell et al., 2018), relationship status (Herreros, 2015; Power, 2020) and education (Huang et al., 2011). Amongst the plethora of research devoted to exploring the influence of experiential adaptation and trust, studies on the impact of migration and ethnic diversity provides the most conclusive evidence for experiential adaptation (Dinesen & Hooghe, 2010).

Out of the many studies on migration and trust, the work by Peter Thisted Dinesen and associates is probably the most important (Dinesen, 2012, 2012, 2013; Dinesen et al., 2020, 2022; Dinesen & Hooghe, 2010). In one of the first studies to examine the effects of migration and trust in Europe, Dinesen and Hooghe (2010) tracked trust amongst descendants of immigrants in Europe and found that immigrants, by and large, adapted their levels of trust to that of the

natives in their contemporary countries. The results further suggest that second-generation immigrants follow "to a very large extent" the same pathways as that of the natives in their contemporary countries. Dinesen and Hooghe (2010) concludes that ancestral country trust rate can help predict trust but only amongst the first-generation immigrants. Moreover, the authors also found that amongst the first-generation immigrants, trust would not improve over time, regardless of how long they stayed in their contemporary countries. This left Dinesen and Hooghe (2010) with the conclusion that while experiential adaptation is prevalent, it requires the subjects to be at an age where they are susceptible to the socioeconomic and cultural influences of their new home.

Part of the reason for the high interest in migration is the so-called 'natural experiment' that occurs when one group of people moves to another geographical location where the socio-economic and cultural circumstances (and importantly, the trust levels) are completely different. Usually, trust tends to vary between nations and as such researchers have long been interested in exploring what happens with people's trust when they migrate from one country to another, especially if they migrate from a high and/or low trusting country to something entirely different. However, this remains a rather contested area as some researchers argue in favour of the active updating model, e.g. experiential adaptation warrants change, whereas others claim to have found evidence in line with the settled disposition model, i.e. cultural preservation (for more details on the cultural perspective, see in 3.2 further below). Realistically though, both perspectives ought to be viewed as 'ideal types' that when viewed from as absolutes, since each perspective is fundamentally flawed since trust is influenced by experiential adaptations as well as cultural persistence, albeit to various degrees depending on individual circumstances.

3.2 The Cultural Perspective

The cultural perspective (Uslaner, 2002, 2018) – in more recent work also referred to as the settled dispositions model (Lersch, 2023) – argues that social trust is predominantly shaped during childhood and adolescence. Importantly,

the cultural perspective further argues for the so-called 'cultural persistence' of social trust amongst adults, emphasizing that trust will inhibit a culture-based resilience that results in a durable form of trust that crystalizes in early adulthood and remains stable throughout the remainder of people's life course (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). While the cultural perspective attributes a great deal of social trust to parenting (Lizardo, 2017), social trust is also believed to be influenced by the socioeconomic, and cultural context of one's upbringing (Uslaner, 2008). On the flip side, perceived inequality and institutional unfairness during one's upbringing have been found to leave lasting scars on people's ability to trust in others, even if the same issues are absent later in life (Fairbrother & Martin, 2013; Rothstein, 2011; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Thus, the cultural perspective highlights the significant formative impact of early life-course experiences for shaping adult's social trust.

Eric M. Uslaner, probably the most important proponent of the cultural perspective, argues that social trust ought to be viewed as a moral value that is independent from the influence of personal experiences, civic groups and informal socializing (Uslaner, 2002). Instead, Uslaner argues that trust is something we learn from our parents, making it a value that is stable over long periods of time. Uslaner further argues for the connection between an optimistic worldview, charitable contributions, inclusive beliefs, democratic worldviews and higher degrees of trust – stating that more trust can make things better for all (2002, pp. 1–13).

Prior to Uslaner's approach to treat social trust as a moralistic value, most trust research had focused on instrumental and/or strategic reasons for trusting other people where trust was often linked to the calculating nature, present in rational choice theory, where X trust Y to do Z, or put differently, if you have proven to be trustworthy in the past I will trust you in the future (Hardin, 1993). Uslaner, however, proposes a far more general version of trust, i.e. the belief that most people can be trusted without prior experiences pertaining to their trustworthiness. Famously, Uslaner defined trust as: "[t]rust is the chicken soup of social life. It brings us all sorts of good things, from a willingness to get involved in our communities to higher rates of economic growth and, ultimately, to satisfaction with government performance, to making daily life more pleasant. Yet, like chicken soup, it appears to work somewhat mysteriously. It might seem that we can only develop trust in people we know.

Yet, trust's benefits come when we put faith in strangers." (Uslaner, 2002, p. 1). Throughout the thesis, I draw a lot of inspiration from Uslaner's influential work (Uslaner, 2002, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2018), in particular as his role as one of the front figures for the cultural perspective and the idea that trust represents something larger than a simple trust equation.

3.3 Cultural Persistence vs. Experiential Adaptation

Trust research has an ample interest in migration because of the latter constitutes a 'natural experiment' for testing some of the key claims of the cultural- and experiential perspective. What happens when people move from a low-trust to a high-trust environment (or vice versa)? Social trust differs considerably between countries (Delhey & Newton, 2005), and adaption vs. resilience of social trust poses an excellent scenario for testing the key claims of the two most important perspectives on stability and change in social trust.

Early works by Gitelman (1982) play an important role in this regard. Analysing social trust amongst immigrants from the United States and Soviet Union to Israel, he finds evidence in favour of cultural persistence rather than experiential adaptation. While immigrants from the US displayed higher levels of social trust than the USSR immigrants, both groups remained more-or-less unchanged during the first three years of their stay in Israel, suggesting that the cultural persistence of their ancestral trust was stronger than any potential experiential adaptation.

Using the US General Social Survey (GSS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) and linking trust data of descendants to US immigrants to examine the persistence of social trust amongst immigrants to the United States, Rice and Feldman (1997) find that the average level of trust amongst immigrants to the United States is very similar to contemporary ancestral trust in their countries of origin, thus supporting the cultural persistence rather than experiential adaptation.

Inspired by Rice and Feldman (1997), Uslaner (2008) finds that descendants' social trust tends to strongly correlate with ancestral trust in the US. Uslaner also finds that living in an environment shared by many people with a background from the Nordic countries – the region with the highest

levels of trust in the world – is positively correlated with individual-level social trust, concluding that "there is evidence for both cultural and context. Where you live shapes your level of trust. But the evidence is far stronger that where your grandparents come from shapes your values " (2008, p. 739).

In one of the first studies to examine the effects or migration and trust in Europe, Dinesen and Hooghe (2010) tracked trust amongst descendants of immigrants in Europe and found that immigrants' trust tends to adopt to that of the natives in their destination countries. The results further suggests that second-generation immigrants follow to a very large extent the same pathways as that of the natives in their contemporary countries. Dinesen and Hooghe (2010) conclude that ancestral trust predict first-generation immigrants' trust. Moreover, the authors also found that amongst the first-generation immigrants, trust would not improve over time, regardless of long they stayed in their contemporary countries. This left Dinesen and Hooghe (2010) with the subject to be at an age where they are susceptible to the socioeconomic and cultural influences of their new home and if they are that threshold then evidence of cultural persistence is more likely to be found, see also (Bergh & Öhrvall, 2018; Dinesen, 2012, 2012, 2013; Dinesen et al., 2020, 2022).

3.4 The 'Set-Point' Theory

The set-point theory, originally developed to understand change and stability in subjective well-being (Lucas, 2007; Lucas et al., 2003), proposes that people's values and attitudes develop during the earlier phases of their life course and that they will 'crystallize' upon entry into adulthood. Even though these values might fluctuate in the short-term, the set-point theory assumes them to fluctuate around those stable 'set' values. The set-point theory thus represents an important theoretical bridge between the otherwise rigid ideals represented by either experiential adaptation or cultural persistence. Highlighting the possibility for attitudinal short-term changes while simultaneously advocating for long-term stability is thus the essence of the set-point theory (Anusic et al., 2014; Kuhn, 1962; Lucas, 2007) and it will be used throughout the thesis as a more pragmatic compliment to the cultural- and experiential perspectives.

While originally developed by researchers interested in studying the influence of subjective well-being (Headey, 2008b, 2008a; Lucas et al., 2003) and despite the many shared similarities between trust and subjective well-being (Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022; Helliwell & Wang, 2010; Hudson, 2006; Zangger, 2023), the set-point theory has surprisingly rarely featured in scholarly research on change and stability in social trust. One important exception is a recent study by Dawson (2019). Exploring the cultural persistence of social trust with British panel data, he finds that social trust, despite fluctuating in a short-term perspective, tends to be stable from a long-term perspective. While not explicitly acknowledging the set-point theory, Dawson (2019) identifies a pattern of change (unstable in the short-term, stable in the long-term) that empirically aligns with the theoretical framework of the set-point theory.

3.5 The Impressionable Years Hypothesis

The impressionable years' hypothesis argues that people's values, attitudes and beliefs go through a period of increased malleability during the development from adolescent to adult (Dinas, 2010). Key factors that are triggering this change particularly include: increased exposure to, and/or introduction to, new world views, ideologies, perspectives, beliefs and ideas (Krosnick & Aiwin, 1989). The impressionable years' hypothesis further states that when people begin to reach the end of this formative phase, their values, attitudes and beliefs will begin to crystallize - resulting in much more robust 'mindsets' that are unlikely to change unless subject to traumatic experiences (Uslaner, 2002).

Importantly, the impressionable years' hypothesis emphasizes the so-called *primacy effect* (Birnbaum, 1974) which underscores that although different cohort may experience the same external shock at the same time, the perceived influence of this event will be felt differently across generations. Specifically, older people are likely to have more experience from previous, similar shocks and are therefore better equipped to understand and deal with similar future shocks, whereas younger people cannot draw on those previous experiences, which enhances the effect (Schuman & Corning, 2012). Thus, experiences are likely to have a stronger impact on younger people. The very period between

adolescence and early adulthood is characterized by new experiences. In fact, the impressionable years represent a period in which most people experience majorly impactful experiences for the first time, like graduation, (un)employment and first love (and possible heartbreak).

The impressionable years' hypothesis features surprisingly rarely in social trust research, with most of the existing studies focusing on political outcomes (Dinas, 2010, 2013; Jeannet & Dražanová, 2019; Osborne et al., 2011). Studying parental influence on political standings amongst 18 year olds with German panel data, Bacovsky and Fitzgerald (2023) find that parental cues are most influential during late child (9-11) and late teenagerhood (18-19), thus warranting support for the impressionable years as a particularly important phase in which political participation and belonging are more malleable. Examining the malleability of social trust from early adolescence to young adulthood in a diverse sample of pupils from the Swedish city of Örebro, Abdelzadeh and Lundbergs (2017) find that the early stages of adolescence are marked by a greater instability in social trust, an instability that will gradually stabilize as they come of age, upon which the authors themselves states that "*our findings point to the significance of the impressionable-years hypothesis for understanding the development of adolescents' social trust*" (2017, p. 222).

An important reason for the absence of the impressionable years' hypothesis in studies about change and stability in social trust might stem from the fact that most large-scale survey studies require participants to be at least 18 years old. However, with legal maturity as the baseline age, those studies might censor their data at an age that is too late to capture the alleged malleability of trust in adolescence, see (Aksoy et al., 2020; González & Simes, 2023).

Values and attitudes are not formed in a vacuum but are shaped and influenced by collective experiences formed by the economic, social and political circumstances of one's time (Mannheim, 1970; Pilcher, 1994). When studying the influence of the impressionable years one ought to consider *when*, from a historical perspective, people experience their most malleable years. In other words, each cohort is likely to share certain attitudes and values because they experienced similar economic, social and political circumstances during their respective upbringing (and impressionable years).

An equally important factor to consider is *where* one's impressionable years took place. Socio-economic and cultural circumstances vary from country to

country and from region to region, leading to a diverse set of influences on the values and beliefs that the malleable youth views as important. This relates to the concept of personal culture outlined by Kiley and Vaisey (2020), which in simple terms accentuates the relationship between geographically situated cultural inheritance and the development of values and attitudes. Essentially, it holds that each society has its own cultural inheritance and history which influences how certain values develop (Kiley & Vaisey, 2020; Vaisey & Kiley, 2021). Increased economic efficiency and industrialization tend, for instance, to make people more tolerant and accepting of diversity (Inglehart, 1971, 2015).

3.6 The Life Course Perspective

The 'life course perspective' is a theoretical orientation from many interdisciplinary fields, such as sociology, psychology, criminology, biology and social-psychology. The common denominator, as the name suggests, is the broader focus on people's journey through life. *Ageing*, *time* and *timing* thus play a crucial role in the life course perspective, both from a more biological development perspective but, more importantly, from a perspective that analyses how institutions, culture and socio-economic contexts shape life-course trajectories and transitions (Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003; Entwisle et al., 2003).

The life-course perspective distinguishes between two major dimensions, 1) longer *life phases* that are typically marked by stable *trajectories* and 2) shorter *transitional periods* where change is prevalent (Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Entwisle et al., 2003). In short, the life-course perspective argues that people are more responsive to stimuli during shorter transitional periods. A key feature that often occurs during these short transitional periods is changes in social role(s), identity and future social prospects. For example, transitioning from a student to a worker upon graduating school and entering the workforce. The choices people make during such influential periods will thus significantly influence the life trajectory of the individual going into their next life phase.

The key concept called *role-change* means, simply put, to go from one social role to another. In the process of transitioning between roles, we inadvertently

hold the door open for some life-course trajectories while closing the door on others (Entwisle et al., 2003). Naturally, these role-changes are influenced by a multitude of factors, such as the current socio-economic and cultural circumstances. For instance, during the second world war, the enlistment frequency in the US military was very high, with many young people aspiring to join the army and fight the Nazi's (Edelstein, 2001). In comparison, throughout the Vietnam war (Shields, 1980), and particularly during its latter stages, the enlistment frequency significantly dropped as social movements like 'peace and love' and general anti-war movement rose in popularity in the US. While certainly simplified, the point is that the cultural- and social circumstances will, according to the life course perspective, significantly influence people's choices during their more susceptible transitional periods and per extension also influence their forthcoming life trajectories.

Another key concept from the life course perspective is the idea of *turning points*, which Sampson and Laub's (2006) coined when studying criminal behaviour from a life course perspective. Turning points consist, according to Sampson and Laub, of moments in people's lives where their criminal career may be diverged resulting in the subjects desisting from a criminal lifestyle. The main difference between turning points and transitional periods (e.g. adolescence), is that turning points can seemingly take place at any time during people's life course, leading researchers to believe that the turning points are mostly influenced by social, cultural or economic factors. Having said that, turning points can and likely will be more frequent during transitional periods when susceptibility for change is increased. While the focus by Sampson and Laub (2006) differs from my own, I felt it was important to recognize that the life course perspective highlights two stages where people's life trajectory is particularly susceptible to change.

Adolescence is, due to the rapid physical-, emotional- and mental development that occurs during this period, often highlighted as the most influential transitional period of the entire life course (Mortimer et al., 2003). In addition to the rapid biological and psychosocial changes, the life-course perspective also emphasizes how family, communities and historical context contribute to shape adolescents' personal development and life trajectories (Crosnoe, 2000; Elder, 1998; Goossens, 2020).

Family, as one would expect, plays a pivotal role during adolescence and part of that relates to the transformation of one's social role, i.e. developing from a child that is largely dependent on their caregivers to an autonomous person (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2003). This process is often marked by conflicts concerning everything from new values and expectations to simply attaining more independence and agency. Naturally, the resources that are available during adolescence are mostly dependent on the that are resources available for the family, which in turn influences and structures the opportunities that the adolescents may face.

Emotional support, or the lack thereof, is frequently linked to family structures and may have significant impact on the persons current life trajectory and future choices. Friends and peers constitute another important determinant of adolescents' social development and overarching life trajectory is the peer relations and experienced sense of belonging. Having friends and/or belonging to a social community of peers play a crucial role in the construction of the adolescents social identity and role (Crosnoe, 2000). Adolescents typically rely on their peers for validation and emotional support in times of hardship, or just in general when experiencing the emotional toil that adolescence and puberty typically demands. Having close relations with peers should therefore be underscored as a very important factor since it directly influences their self-esteem, sense of belonging and life choices. However, since adolescents are, on average, more in tune with current peer trends and popular media trends the social norms that dictate whether something is of importance or not is highly linked to what they perceive to be relevant during the historical time and cultural context that they are currently experiencing. In contemporary society, for instance, being present on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or YouTube is socially far more important than it has been in the past. This is partly due to social media platforms being a vital pathway to finding peers with similar interests, but also because a lot of communication takes place on such platforms, and being in-the-loop of current events is rather important to remain in certain social groups (Nesi et al., 2018a, 2018b; Véronneau & Schwartz-Mette, 2021).

Education and school system climate also constitute the major factors that influence adolescents' life-course trajectories and choices, not only because they occupy a significant amount of time in young people's lives, but also

because they serve as a meeting spot for peer-to-peer relations (Paino & Renzulli, 2013; Pallas, 2003). Due to adolescents' malleability, the school experience can significantly influence their decisions to continue higher education or other alluring career opportunities.

Adolescence is also a period during which many young people engage in risk-taking behaviours. While this may be considered a natural step in their development to gain autonomy and independence, the life-course literature also highlights potential negative outcomes (Goossens, 2020; Laub & Sampson, 2006). For instance, adolescents that believe their future opportunities to be limited are more inclined to rebel against their situation through delinquency, substance abuse etcetera. In contrast, adolescents with a solid support system, strong social ties and hope for the future are believed to be substantially more resistant to the negative risks that influence most adolescents (Sampson & Laub, 2003).

All in all, there are many factors that influence people's trajectory throughout the life course, and in this segment, I have emphasized some of the more influential factors during the transitional period commonly referred to as adolescence. Importantly, the theoretical framework of the life-course perspective and the impressionable years hypothesis overlap on key elements, with the most important one being heightened flexibility and malleability that occurs during people's development from child over adolescent to adult.

4 Measuring Social Trust

In this chapter, I discus the operationalization of social trust, and present the data and methods that serve as the empirical backbone of the thesis.

4.1 The General Trust Question

Social trust is often measured using the standard trust question: "*Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*" This measure goes back to the 1950s (Rosenberg, 1956). The first iteration of the 'General Trust Question', as it is commonly referred to, was dichotomous with the two valid responses being either: "*most people can be trusted*" or alternatively "*you can't be too careful when dealing with others*".

While capturing the entirety of a concept as complex as generalized social trust with a single-item measure seems like a fool's errand, the previously described benefits of social trust, as measured by the standard question, witness to its empirical worth.

Several international large-scale survey studies, such as the American National Election (ANE) studies (since 1964) and the US General Social Survey (GSS) (since 1972) employed the general trust question early on. It was not until later that the dichotomous variant of the general trust question was replaced by a Likert scale. For example, both the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) and the European Social Survey (ESS) have measured social trust with an 11-point scale of the standard trust measure since 2002.

While most researchers would argue that changing from a dichotomous measure to a Likert-scale variable has benefitted trust research (Lundmark et al., 2016), some still prefer the dichotomous version over the scale (Newton et al., 2018; Uslaner, 2015). The main argument against the scale version seems

to be that the scale promotes the middle-ground options i.e. the response options 4 to 6 on the 0 to 10 scale even if the respondents are, in general, trusting or distrusting of other people (Uslaner, 2015). That said, a clear benefit with the 11-point trust scale is that it allows to track within-individual change in a much more nuanced way compared with what would be possible with the dichotomous measurement. Furthermore, introducing a spectrum of trust emphasize that people do not deal in absolute terms when deciding who to trust.

In a similar vein, researchers quickly begun combining the general trust question with other variables, such as "*most people are helpful*" and "*most people are fair*" (Reeskens, 2013; Smith, 1997). Attempts to combine the general trust question with elements of helpfulness and/or fairness have been met with a mixed response (Newton et al., 2018). In favour of combination, measurements of fairness and helpfulness correlate quite highly with the standard trust question, and when taken into account together, the three items form the 'misanthropy scale' (Reeskens, 2013; Smith, 1997).

4.2 Is Social Trust WEIRD?

W-E-I-R-D is an acronym used to describe research that has a history of over-sampling participants from 'Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic countries', essentially skewing the perspective to suit the worldview of the global elite since most of the worlds' population does not reside in weird countries (Henrich et al., 2010). Following the definition by Henrich et al., (2010), I cautiously argue that social trust fits the requirements of a 'weird' concept since the majority of research is based on participants from so-called 'weird' countries.

Examining the generalization of the standard single trust measure in global comparison, Torpe and Lolle (2011) argue that there are considerable challenges when applying it on a global scale, with the most noteworthy results being people from diverse countries in Asia, Africa and countries in Central and Eastern Europe interpreted the general trust question quite differently than those from so-called weird-ones. This problem seems to stem from the understanding of who those "most people" are that the standard trust measure

tries to capture. Participants from many non-'weird' countries tend to concentrate on their perception of familiar people's trustworthiness when assessing whether they trust "most people", thus failing to capture the trust they have to strangers in general (Torpe & Lolle, 2011). Studying the radius of trust – i.e. how wide the circle of others is when assessing trust in "most people" – Delhey et al., (2011) also finds that the *radius of trust* varies greatly across different countries. Similarly to Torpe and Lolle (2011), Delhey et al., (2011) find that, the radius of trust is wider in countries that are wealthy, with a substantially more narrow radius of trust in Confucian countries like China, South Korea and Japan. Consequently, the findings by Delhey et al., (2011) and, Torpe and Lolle (2011) raise critical questions regarding the cross-sectional validity of the standard single-item measurement.

Torpe and Lolle (2011) even claim that the general trust question cannot be used to universally capture generalized social trust and that it should be reconstructed. Presenting a solution to the differences in interpretations, they modified the general trust question in a seemingly simple, yet effective manner by underscoring the trust one has towards people they meet "*for the first time*". Similarly, Delhey et al., also argue for some type of change, stating that "a radius-sensitive measure of trust provides a more accurate picture of the world-wide geography of general trust" (2011, p. 801).

Social trust aligns with the qualifications of a weird concept with heavy western influences and to avoid getting lost in translation, we need to consider the cultural and socio-economic context and clearly articulate our way of measuring social trust. However, Torpe and Lolle's (2011) proposal to construct a more universal global version of the industry standard single-item measure has since publication in 2011 not generated any lasting changes to measuring general trust. Part of the problem is, as I see it, tied to the challenge of changing an established measure that has proven its empirical worth. Therefore, calling for new forms of measurements, even if they are needed to study social trust in the affiliated regions, seems to be an unattractive suggestion for many survey organizations as well as individual researchers who want to track the development of social trust over time. While social trust may be considered a weird concept, the solution presented by Delhey et al., (2011) is thus, in my mind, an attractive alternative to adjust the single-item

standard trust measure with country-specific weights that adjust for cultural differences regarding the radius of trust.

4.3 Data

In the following section, I briefly introduce the survey studies that serve as the empirical backbone of my thesis.

4.3.1 The Swiss Household Panel

The Swiss Household Panel (SHP) is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and is a nationally representative longitudinal panel study run by the Swiss centre of expertise in the social sciences (FORS). The main goal of the SHP is to observe and record social change all the while dedicating special attention to dynamics of altering living conditions and representations in the population of Switzerland (Tillmann et al., 2022). Logistically, the SHP is an annual panel study based on random samples of private households in Switzerland over time, interviewing all household members from the age of 14 via telephone although following the digital development the share of web-based interviews has increased substantially in recent years.

Structurally, the SHP consists of four samples, each group representing a year-specific influx of randomly selected households into the SHP survey. This design facilitates distinguishing period from cohort effects when following individuals' values, beliefs and behaviour over time.

The SHP covers all household members from the year that they turn 14 years old (Tillmann et al., 2022). Data collection began in 1999 with the first sample reaching 12,931 individuals from 5074 households. Social trust was, however, not measured before 2002. Since then, it is annually surveyed using an 11-point version of the standard single-item measurement. The second sample, added in 2004, reached 2538 households containing 6569 individuals. The third sample from 2013 reached 4093 households containing 9945 individuals and the fourth and most recent sample from 2020 consists of data from 4380 households containing 7557 individuals (Tillmann et al., 2022). Individual-

level response rates have remained high throughout all four samples with 85, 76, 81 and 74 per cent, respectively for each sample group in that order.

A common practice in large scale surveys like the SHP is the use of so-called weights. These weights are used to adjust the sample so that it better represents the entire population that the survey aims to examine, in the case of the SHP that would be the entire Swiss population. By applying weights, you can essentially correct biases that may arise in the data, like over- or underrepresentation of certain groups, in short weights ensure that the collected data match the characteristics of the population the survey was designed to study (Pfeffermann, 1996). For instance, if the elderly are overrepresented in the data when comparing with the national statistic, one solution is to use weights to adjust that representation accordingly and make the data in-line with the representation of the nation.

The SHP use three kinds of weights, 1) cross-sectional household weights, 2) cross-sectional individual weights and 3) longitudinal individual weights (Antal & Rothenbühler, 2015). The data is divided into individual-level and household-level data and currently the only weights given to the household-level is a cross-sectional one. However, in this thesis I am mainly working with the individual-level data, for which I can rely on cross-sectional and longitudinal weights. In short, these weights are needed by the SHP to increase the generalizability of the survey results and to adjust when a certain group is over- or underrepresented in the sample to remain representative of the Swiss population (Antal & Rothenbühler, 2015; Miratrix et al., 2018). The cross-sectional individual-level weights have four main functions, and these are to ascertain generalized weight share, adjust for non-responders, combine the panels (currently there are 4 unique panels, e.g. samples, in the SHP survey) and to calibrate with population tools to match the socio-demographic representation of Switzerland. The longitudinal weights utilize the same steps to the cross-sectional weights with one exception, they do not adjust for generalized weight share (Antal & Rothenbühler, 2015; Tillmann et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 Special Issue

Between the 20th of May and the 20th of June 2020, the SHP deviated from its routine and fielded an extra survey round focusing on the on-going COVID-19 and its challenges among a random selection of their original samples.

Contrary to previous and subsequent surveys, the extra COVID-19 survey contains a range of unique items concerning the respondents' perception of how the government handled the crisis and how the respondents, and their significant others, were affected by the pandemic and the restrictions. Yet other standard socio-demographic characteristics were not measured in the special pandemic issue, bearing important empirical limitations for their use in qualitative modelling.

4.3.2 The European Social Survey

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven cross-national survey established in 2001 with the overarching goal of measuring attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of 15 plus year-old respondents from about 40 different countries in Europe (European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC), 2024). The ESS is conducted about every other year totalling, 11 rounds at the time of writing, with the first round of data stemming from 2001 and the most recent round being from 2023. The ESS has expanded throughout the years, with in total 39 countries having taken part in at least one round. The sample size of each country depends on population size with smaller countries requiring 800 participants and larger countries requiring 1500 participants to ensure that the ESS data can be used to make accurate analysis of the general population in each country and to reduce the margin of error as much as possible.

In terms of data collection, the ESS relies on in-person interviews which are most often conducted in the respondents' residences. Similar to the SHP, computer-assisted interviews (also known as 'CAPI') have become increasingly prevalent in latter rounds. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries also relied on self-completion methods.

Importantly, the ESS generates cross-sectional data, meaning that in each survey round, new samples with new respondents are invited to participate. It is therefore not the same individuals who are interviewed each year (like in the SHP), and people are able to participate in the survey from the age of 15 years old. Last but certainly not least, an 11-point version of the standard single-item measurement of social trust has been included in all of the available ESS rounds (2024).

4.3.3 The World Values Survey

The World Values Survey (WVS) is a global social science project that monitors socio-economic, socio-cultural, moral, religious and political values in different cultures and nations around the world. The overarching goal of the WVS is to assist scientists and policymakers in understanding changes in beliefs, values and motivations of people throughout the world (Haerpfer et al., 2022). The scope of the WVS is substantial, covering close to 100 countries containing roughly 90 percent of the world's population making it, at the time of writing, the largest non-commercial, cross-sectional, time series exploration of beliefs and values.

One round of WVS data collection takes about two to three years, including processing and release of the data. Thus, although the first round of data collection began in 1981, it was not finished until 1984. At the time of writing, the WVS dataset contains 7 rounds with the 8th round currently being processed and scheduled for publication in 2026 (Haerpfer et al., 2022).

Sample-wise, the WVS require most participating countries to include at least 1200 survey participants to assure that the sample representativity and to minimise survey error. Similarly to the SHP and ESS, the WVS conducts face-to-face interviews at the respondent's place of residence either by traditional paper questionnaires or by computer assisted ones. Once the target sample size of 1200 participants per country is achieved, the country-specific survey programs can choose to further include participants below the age of 18 (Haerpfer et al., 2022). Social trust is measured using a dichotomous version of the standard question where 0 represents no trust and 1 represents trust (see section 4.1).

4.3.4 Ethical Considerations

According to the Swedish Research Council, "ethics in research concern the researcher's relationship to the research task or research assignment". The concept of 'good research practice' is often used. There is no clear-cut definition of the concept, but it is used to designate the collected ethical requirements that researchers must follow in their professional roles. Following best practice recommendation includes the researcher's responsibility to relate to research ethics frameworks, including complying

with legislation and established norms for research ethics" (Ethics in Research and Good Research Practice, 2019). The Swedish Research Council asks researchers in Sweden to follow the four principles of reliability, honesty, respect and accountability. Reliability relates to the quality of the research, which according to the Swedish Research Council is reflected in the design, method and analysis of the material. Honesty relates to keeping a transparent, fair and objective approach to one's research and the results. Respect involves respect "for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment" (Ethics in Research and Good Research Practice, 2019). Accountability is perhaps the most important consideration and it involves, as the name suggests, that the research should be "for research from idea to publication, for management and organisation, for education, supervision and mentorship, and for wider consequences" (Ethics in Research and Good Research Practice, 2019).

Moreover, the Swedish Research Council highlights four distinct ethical considerations for research involving people, namely 1) to do good, 2) to do no harm, 3) to respect autonomy and 4) to uphold justice. Specifically, 'to do good' is quite abstract and broad but part of the goal from a research perspective is to generate new knowledge that may be useful for society, without 'doing harm' to the participants of ones' study. Naturally, one needs 'to respect the autonomy' of one's participants, this entails ensuring that the participants have given informed consent to participate. In my case, this also entails that the participants remain anonymous and unidentifiable.

'To uphold justice' sounds like something out of a comic, this includes being transparent about the benefits and risks of the findings and the people that the research might influence, and of course to adhere to the legal jurisdictions. In addition, one should strive to make sure that the participants of ones' study can reap some of the benefits with ones' study (God forskningssed 2024, n.d.).

Throughout my thesis, I draw on secondary quantitative data from established large-scale survey programs. The three datasets that I draw on, i.e. the European Social Survey (ESS), the World Values Survey (WVS) and the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), have excluded any potentially sensitive data before it reached my hands, thus making it impossible to identify any person-sensitive information. Importantly, participation is, of course, voluntary and

all three survey studies adhere to the ethical guidelines that the global research community stipulates.

Notably, while the mentioned datasets contain thousands of individual-level data, the results are presented in an aggregated format that emphasizes either trends over time, or how specific groups fared during a specific time (see article 1 and 3 for examples where I analyse the collective influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of early-life unemployment).

Furthermore, in terms of availability, the thesis is designed to be a so-called compilation thesis, e.g. a thesis compiled of a separate set of studies in a format that is suitable for publication in peer-reviewed journals. As opposed to a monograph thesis, where the doctoral candidate writes a book that may become purchasable after the final defence, the main analytical contributions of my thesis will be available through the articles that are going to be published in open-access format, thus allowing readers all over the world – including those who participated in the empirical studies – to freely access my key findings.

4.4 Methods

In the following section, I discuss the multivariate quantitative methods that are used in the three studies that form the empirical backbone of the thesis.

4.4.1 Fixed-Effects Regression

Unlike 'classic' ordinary least squared (OLS) regression models, fixed-effects (FE) models do focus on variation *within* individuals rather than on variation *between* individuals (Allison, 2009). FE models control, by default, for unobserved time-invariant variables that could otherwise bias estimates (Brüderl & Ludwig, 2015). However, this also means that variables that do not change over time, such as birth year or biological sex etc, are automatically excluded from FE models.

FE models achieve to remove unobserved heterogeneity by de-meaning, with 'de-meaning' referring to subtracting any observed value at a given time from a unit's grand-mean across survey waves (Allison, 2009). The key assumption is that individual specific heterogeneity is time constant and can

therefore be eliminated by the de-meaning process, which make the participants serve as their own controls.

In contrast to standard OLS regression, FE regression models provide consistent estimates even if individual-specific heterogeneity is correlated with the independent variables, assuming that the heterogeneity is time-invariant. FE models do, however, also come with limitations. For example, the estimates generated by FE models can be more sensitive to within-individual measurement error than models that account for variation between individuals, since the analysis relies on within-individual variation for estimation. Still, FE models have proven to be well-suited and, importantly, to be computationally efficient for large-scale individual-level panel data.

In algebraic terms, the FE regression models can be explained in the following manner:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Y represents the dependent variable with the subscripts for unit *i* and time *t*. *α* is the intercept (fixed effect) of each individual unit *i*, this is the part where the model controls for individual characteristics that do not change over time. β is the coefficient of the explanatory variable *X* which in turn contains the subscripts for unit *i* and time *t*. Note that there can be many explanatory variables, it does not have to be just one as shown in the example. *ε r*epresents the error term which also comes with the subscript's unit *i* and time *t*.

The First Difference Estimator

In a few cases when the data unexpectantly faced continuity challenges, I use the first difference (FD) estimator (Brüderl & Ludwig, 2015). Similar to FE models, FD models focus on within- instead of between-unit variation. FD regression can be used in cases where the assumptions of FE models are violated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SHP conducted for example an ad hoc survey that was designed to measure the impact of the pandemic among participants of the SHP. This 'special issue' of the SHP did, however, not include all the questions that were usually included in the annual SHP survey. Unfortunately, this meant that the number of overlapping questions was heavily limited, making the FE models much less attractive, especially from

survey just prior to the COVID-19 survey. Fortunately, the SHP integrated a few essential questions regarding the pandemic in their annual survey in the years 'after' the pandemic, i.e. 2020-2021. By using the FD estimator, I could thus analyse the decrease in social trust that occurred between 2019 and the special COVID-19 survey and the increase in social trust that occurred between the COVID-19 survey and the 2020 survey (for reference, the 2020 survey was held in the autumn). Without going into too many specifics here (see Paper 1 for more details) the FD estimator enabled me to analyse a timeframe of the pandemic that I would not have been able to do with a FE model, given the more arduous data requirements of the FE models.

4.4.2 Random-Effects Regression

Random-effects (RE) are often used to model data that is clustered within units (e.g. repeated measures from the same respondents), assuming that the unit-specific effects are uncorrelated with the included independent variables. In other words, the RE model assumes that the individual unobserved factors do not systematically influence the dependent variable in relation to the explanatory variable(s). RE models further assumes that the difference across various units (think individuals, nations or other groups) can be captured by a random element that is independent of the other independent variable(s). Rather than omitting time-invariant variables, the RE models include a random component and treat it as part of the error term (Amini et al., 2012; Andreß et al., 2013).

In algebraic terms, RE models can be explained in the following manner:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta X_{it} + \upsilon_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Y represents the dependent variable with the subscripts for unit *i* and time *t*. *α* is the intercept and in a random effects regression this value is a constant that represents the average level of Y_{it} across all observed units and time periods (i.e. $_i$ and $_t$). While the intercept is the same for all units and time periods in a random effects model, the random effects i.e. the υ_i accounts for the differences between units. The *α* thus captures the mean-value of the dependent

variable across all units. X represents the independent variable(s) for each unit (i) and time (t). The coefficient β show how much Y changes for one unit change in X, if all else remains constant. As mentioned, υ_i represents the random effects of each unit, making this a unit-specific intercept capable of accounting for any unobserved differences between the factors that influence the Y. For instance, if you are researching social trust across countries, the different socioeconomic and cultural context would be captured by the υ_i. However, in random effect models it is important to note that the effects captured by υ_i is assumed to be random and uncorrelated with the independent variables(s). Lastly, ε *r*epresents the error term which also comes with the subscript's unit *i* and time *t* (Andreß et al., 2013).

Choosing between Fixed- and Random-Effect Regression Models

The main difference between fixed- and random-effect models is that in FE models each unit (person, community, region or country to name a few) gets their own intercept (Amini et al., 2012; Andreß et al., 2013). These intercepts are not random, instead they are specific to each observed unit and the FE model removes any time-invariant differences across these units that could influence the dependent variable (social trust). This inadvertently leads to a regression model that explains change using within-unit variation, or in other words how a specific unit changes over time (Allison, 2009; Brüderl & Ludwig, 2015). RE, in contrast, treat the individual-level effects as random variables drawn from a common distribution, which allows the model to use both within-unit and between-unit variation to estimate the relationship between the dependent variable (social trust) and the independent variables (Firebaugh et al., 2013). The main difference is thus that while FE removes between-unit variation, RE models do not have to remove anything (Bell & Jones, 2015). Why, then, not always use RE models then? The RE model can only be used when the assumption of uncorrelated random effects holds true, and if the assumption is false, i.e. they are correlated, then FE should be preferred (Amini et al., 2012).

Fortunately, statistical tools exist designed to help researchers interested in studying changes over time decide between a fixed- or random-effects approach. One standard way is to perform both variations of the regression,

save the estimates generated in the analysis and perform a so-called Hausman test on both models (Amini et al., 2012). The Hausman test poses a simple, but efficient, hypothesis: is the difference in coefficients between the fixed-effects and the random-effects systematic or not? If they are systematic, then fixed-effects models are advised since the random-effects is inconsistent and in contrast if it is not systematic, the random-effects model is preferred due to the lack of significance between the two models. Accordingly, I relied on the Hausman test in scenarios where I was uncertain about which model to prefer.

4.4.3 Multinomial Logistic Regression

Due to the lack of repeated measures for some of the determinants of change in social trust, paper 1 makes use of multinomial logistic regression. More specifically, I tested the cross-sectional determinants of two-wave change in social trust, with the three possible outcomes of the dependent variables being 'stability (baseline), 'decrease' and 'increase'. Respondents who did not display change in trust thus served as the baseline against which I tested the likelihood to fall into the two other categories of change.

In algebraic terms, the multinominal regression model reads like this:

$$\log \left(\frac{P\,(Y = j \mid X)}{P\,(Y = K \mid X)} \right) = \beta_{j0} + \beta_{j1}X_1 + \beta_{j2}X_2 + \cdots + \beta_{jp}X_p$$

Here, *Y* represents the dependent variable, in this case the categorical outcome that I am trying to predict, e.g. change in social trust during the pandemic. The equation: P (Y = j | X) represents the probability that the outcome is category j (decreases or increases in the pandemic article) for a given set of independent variables (X). For example, what are the odds of losing social trust during the pandemic if being critical of the government's handling of the pandemic? Here, j thus represents the outcome categories 'decrease' or 'increase' in trust and K represents the reference category, i.e. the people who did not experience any change in trust (the stable group). What this essentially tells me is how likely the outcome is to fall into category j (either increase or decrease) compared to the reference category K (stable) when controlling for a set of

independent variables (X). β_{j0} is the intercept and represents the baseline log-odds of being in category j vs. category K, after controlling for all the independent variables. Each category of j thus has their own intercept, but the reference category (K) does not require one since it serves as a baseline for the others. X_1, X_2, … X_p represent the independent variable(s) of category j relative to the reference category K. For each added independent variable (X), their respective coefficients, i.e. β_{j1}, β_{j2}, … β_{jp} indicates the log-odds of either being in category j or the reference category K. For example, if X_1 is the independent variable age then β_{j1} will show me how much the odds of being in either category j (decrease/increase) or the reference category (K, i.e. stable) change as age increases by one unit, which in this case is on a year-by-year basis (Böhning, 1992; Kwak & Clayton-Matthews, 2002).

Having discussed and presented the data and methods, the following chapter reviews the highlights and key findings of the three empirical papers the thesis.

5 Summarizing the Studies

This chapter provides an overview of the three papers that, taken together, form the empirical backbone of my thesis.

5.1 Study I: Social Trust During the Pandemic

Study I deals with change and stability in individual-level social trust during the recent pandemic (Saaranen, 2024).

Theoretically, I draw on the two dominant strands of research regarding social trust's potential to change over the life-course: the *settled dispositions model* – advocating for cultural persistence in social trust within individuals over time (Lizardo, 2017; Uslaner, 2002) and the *active updating model* – arguing (in this case) that crisis-induced experiences may leave a lasting scar on people's social trust (Dinesen & Bekkers, 2017; Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Lersch, 2023). Interestingly, even proponents of the cultural perspective (Uslaner, 2010, 2014) argue that some crises can be so deep that they can affect social trust in the short-term. In the long-term, the cultural perspective would, however, expect social trust to recover to pre-crisis levels. Inspired by this reactive take, I draw on the *'set-point' theory* (Anusic et al., 2014; Kuhn, 1962) which argues that people's values and beliefs develop individual 'baselines' during adolescence, around which they later tend to fluctuate in the short-term (Lucas, 2007).[3]

Analytically, the study had three goals, 1) to investigate the malleability of social trust during the pandemic, 2) to evaluate the applicability of the three theoretical frameworks (settled disposition vs. active updating vs. set-point),

[3] See sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.4 for a more in-depth explanation of the theoretical perspectives.

and 3) to discern whether changes in trust happened amongst the general public or whether some groups were more likely to display change in social trust.

Empirically, I used longitudinal survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) and, importantly, included the SHP's ad hoc COVID-19 issue that was gathered between the 20th of May and the 20th of June 2020 (Tillmann et al., 2022).

Dividing the analysis into three steps, I first used fixed-effects (FE) regression to study the within-individual variation in social trust from 2008 to 2021. I found that most people in Switzerland experienced a significant decrease in social trust between 2019 and the summer of 2020, followed by a rapid recovery between the pandemic's onset and the 2020 survey. This supports findings from a previous study (Dawson, 2019) according to which social trust tends to revert to fixed individual-level "set-points" after short-term fluctuations (Anusic et al., 2014).

Next, I focused on three key survey rounds surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak (2019 → COVID-19 survey → 2020). Using a first-difference (FD) estimator (Brüderl & Ludwig, 2015), I examined within-individual change during the pandemic's first year, which saw a decline ($t_1 \rightarrow t_2$) followed by a recovery ($t_2 \rightarrow t_3$). Consistent with prior research, I found that subjective well-being (Helliwell & Wang, 2010) mitigated the decline between $t_1 \rightarrow t_2$ and facilitated the recovery between $t_2 \rightarrow t_3$. Younger individuals showed a notably higher recovery rate, suggesting greater adaptability.

Finally, I used multinomial logistic regression (Draper & Smith, 1998; Gelman & Hill, 2006) to categorize individuals based on how their social trust changed: those whose trust i) increased, ii) decreased or iii) remained stable. The 'stable' group was used as a reference to compare how different factors affected changes in social trust. I found especially two factors – how people perceived the government's crisis management and the restrictions during the pandemic – to determine changes in social trust.

In sum, my findings emphasize that collective crisis can influence social trust quite severely in the short-term. This warrants criticism of the settled dispositions model in its current reading and highlighting the applicability of the set-point perspective.

5.2 Study II: Social Trust During the Impressionable Years and Beyond

In study II, I depart from the research desideratum to follow the development of individual-level trust from adolescence to adulthood.

Drawing on the *impressionable years' hypothesis* (Dinas, 2010) – arguing that individuals are most susceptible to forming enduring attitudes and beliefs during the transition from childhood to adulthood (i.e. adolescence), and the *life-course perspective* (Elder, 1998) – emphasizing that life trajectories are shaped by an interplay of personal choice, life events and societal factors - and a few relevant previous studies (Abdelzadeh & Lundberg, 2017; C. A. Flanagan & Stout, 2010), I theorize that social trust is particularly malleable during adolescence (Crosnoe, 2000; Entwisle et al., 2003) and stable afterwards.[4]

Empirically, I use cross-sectional survey data from the World Value Survey (WVS), the European Social Survey (ESS) and longitudinal survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). I use a twofold strategy to study the development of social trust from adolescence to adulthood. First, I run descriptive analyses highlighting age-specific development of social trust. Next, I use a combination of fixed-effects (FE) and random-effects (RE) regression models to predict how social trust would develop throughout adolescence while controlling for a few potentially impactful factors (such as, satisfaction with life in general, leisure activities, parents, teachers and social atmosphere etcetera).

In line with previous research, I find support for the notion that school climate matters (C. A. Flanagan & Stout, 2010), that parental relationships are important (Uslaner, 2002) and that notable satisfaction measurements, such as satisfaction with personal relationships, income, leisure activities and life in general are important determinants of trust (Crosnoe, 2000; McLeod & Almazan, 2003; Uslaner, 2002). While my results align with those from previous studies suggesting that social trust is most malleable during adolescence, I find that, irrespective of country- or group-belonging,

[4] See sections 3.5 and 3.6.

adolescents tend to experience a substantial decline in social trust during their early teenage years.

5.3 Study III: Social Trust and the Scars of (Youth) Unemployment

In Study III, Jan Mewes and me expand on the malleability of social trust during the impressionable years. Here, we study whether and how any unemployment experience from the past 'scars' social trust in later life.

Theoretically, we depart from the theoretical bifurcation between the cultural- (Uslaner, 2002, 2008) and experiential- perspective (Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Paxton & Glanville, 2015) regarding change and stability in social trust.[5] Similar to study II, we also draw inspiration from the impressionable years hypothesis (Dinas, 2010), stipulating that individuals transitioning from adolescence to adulthood are particularly susceptible to experiences such as unemployment.[6]

Drawing on longitudinal survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) from 2002 to 2023 and tracking respondents over a period of up to 22 years (Tillmann et al., 2022) and using fixed-effects (FE) regression models, we find that people are not less trusting at times of unemployment compared to times of employment. However, we find that having experienced unemployment during adolescence leave a lasting scar on social trust. We also find that the scars of youth unemployment are cumulative, with each spell of unemployment during adolescence increasing the negative effects of unemployment on social trust.

Overall, our findings give support to a modified reading of the cultural perspective where social trust responds to unemployment during adolescence and early adulthood, only to become stable and immune to negative personal circumstances later in life.

[5] See section 3.1 and 3.2.

[6] See section 3.5.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

Here, I briefly discuss the results, delve deeper into the conclusions of the thesis and, finally, suggest recommendations for future avenues of research.

6.1 Discussion of Results

Study I sets out to explore the evolution of social trust during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to map patterns of individual-levels dynamics of social trust during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess whether changes in social trust during the pandemic could be explained by cultural persistence or experiential adaptation. My findings showed that an unusually large share of people experienced a substantial decline in social trust between the autumn of 2019 and the summer of 2020. Interestingly, an equally large share of respondents saw an increase in their social trust rates between the summer of 2020 and the autumn of 2020 – emphasising that while there was a substantial reaction during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, most people quickly recovered to pre-pandemic levels of trust. Here, the findings are in line with the 'set-point' theory (Anusic et al., 2014; Headey, 2008b, 2008a), which stipulates that values and attitudes tend to fluctuate around a stable individual-level set-point, thus emphasizing that while variations may be observed in the short-term, most people have a tendency to revert back to their pre-fluctuation levels shortly afterwards (Dawson, 2019). Grounded in these findings, I suggest that the set-point theory ought to be regarded as a theoretically fruitful extension of the cultural perspective (Kumove, 2023; Uslaner, 2002, 2014).

The highlights of the first-difference analysis are that respondents with higher rates of subjective well-being were more resistant to the collective decline between 2019 and the summer of 2020 *and* that subjective well-being

had a mitigating effect on the collective increase that occurred between the summer of 2020 and autumn of 2020. In addition to subjective well-being, young age stood out as a particularly important determinant of social trust in the first-difference analysis. Young people had a greater recovery rate, warranting cautious support for the theory that young people, especially those currently going through adolescence, are more malleable and therefore influenced by current events to a greater extent. Through a multinomial logistic regression, I utilized the unique pandemic-related measurements only present in the extra COVID-19 survey. While previous findings underscored the positive spillover effect linked to increased governmental trust (Esaiasson et al., 2021; Kye & Hwang, 2020), I find that respondents who disagreed with the Swiss governments' pandemic countermeasures displayed a short-lived decrease in social trust (a type of negative spillover effect).

Study II addressed the knowledge gap surrounding the malleability of social trust between adolescence and early adulthood. Inspired by theoretical arguments from the impressionable years hypothesis (Dinas, 2010) and life-course theory (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003), I drew on cross-sectional survey data from the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Social Survey (ESS) and longitudinal survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). Overall, my findings suggest that, irrespective of country- or group-belonging, adolescents tend to follow a similar pattern where social trust declines during their early teenage years, which is then followed by a gradual recovery period that spans over their entire adult life. Importantly, my findings further suggests that only a small minority of people can reach the same pre-adolescence levels of social trust later in their life-course.

My findings further invite a more nuanced reading and synthesis of the two most prominent theoretical perspectives regarding the change and/or stability of social trust (e.g. cultural persistence vs. experiential adaptation). While I find that the heightened malleability during adolescence aligns with the cultural perspective (Uslaner, 2002), the universal pattern of declining trust at the onset of teenagerhood challenges current versions of the cultural perspective. Similarly, although the experiential perspective emphasizes the influence of experiences throughout the entire life-course (Glanville & Paxton, 2007), I find that the experiences from the impressionable years (Dinas, 2010) period are substantially more influential, warranting the need to consider the

primacy effect (Birnbaum, 1974) which highlights the greater susceptibility of experiences amongst younger people.

In study III, we set out to examine the scarring effects that youth unemployment has on social trust. Previous research highlights that earlier unemployment experiences have a scarring effect on social trust (Damaske et al., 2024). We argued that previous studies into the relationship between unemployment and social trust had been ignorant of potential life cycle effects and thus at risk of overestimating the 'true' malleability of social trust amongst adults.

We find that the timing of unemployment in people's life course matters: Youth unemployment – but not adult unemployment – scar social trust. Thus disadvantages associated with youth unemployment are also cumulative, emphasizing that long-term unemployment and repeated instances of unemployment are associated with deeper scars on social trust. While re-employment may ease those scars somewhat, it cannot fully compensate for previous unemployment's long-term damage to social trust. Our results suggest a modified reading of the cultural perspective on social trust. Specifically, while Uslaner (2002) argues that social trust will begin to crystallize at the end of childhood, we find, in contrast, that this period of malleability is far longer, essentially emphasizing the need to extend the window of the impressionable years. Based on this discussion, we argue for an incorporation of insights from the impressionable years' literature into the theoretical framework of the cultural perspective: underscoring that social trust does respond to negative experiences, but only up to a certain age bracket.

6.2 Limitations

The three empirical studies that make up the empirical backbone of my thesis face a range of limitations. For example, Study I makes use of longitudinal survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) and, crucially, the ad hoc COVID-19 pandemic oriented survey that was added in late spring to early summer of 2020 (Tillmann et al., 2022). Here, the general trust question, through the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, may have been interpreted differently than in a non-pandemic period (Wollebæk et al., 2021).

Specifically, the wording 'you can't be too careful these days' may have been particularly problematic due to its association with taking steps to avoid infection and following the active guidelines set out by authorities. Research shows though that in many instances, social trust measured empirically by the general trust question actually increased during the early months of the pandemic (Esaiasson et al., 2021; Kye & Hwang, 2020), which makes the risks of misinterpretation difficult to gauge. Further research into the nuances and interpretations of the general trust question in hard times is thus needed.

Although the ad hoc SHP COVID-19 survey enabled an interesting analytical tangle, it created some methodological challenges. Specifically, methods that require consistent and repeated measurements across multiple waves could not be used. Thus, while the pandemic-oriented survey was crucial for understanding the potential short-term influences of the pandemic, more research into the long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis is needed (Aassve et al., 2021; Aksoy et al., 2020).

In study II, I used cross-sectional survey data from the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Social Survey (ESS) and longitudinal survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). While mixing cross-sectional data and longitudinal data may not be a conventional tactic, the comparison between the Swiss longitudinal sample with the two other datasets allowed me to discern the generalizability of age-specific trends beyond the Swiss case. However, both the ESS and the WVS do not allow to follow the individual-level development of people such as longitudinal data do. Longitudinal data, on the other hand, are more susceptible to measurement error such as 'panel conditioning' (Halpern-Manners et al., 2017; Sturgis et al., 2009; Warren & Halpern-Manners, 2012).

Another general limitation of my panel data is that they run the risk to suffer from a 'survival bias'. This is because previous research has shown that people with high social trust tend to, on average, live longer than low-trusters (Giordano et al., 2019). In other words, longitudinal studies may end up with an overrepresentation of 'trusters', an effect that would be extra potent amongst respondents who have participated in several survey rounds. While I rely heavily on the longitudinal survey data from the SHP, future studies could benefit from drawing on similar household panels across the world, in part for comparative purposes but also to analyse social trust longitudinally in various

cultural contexts, assuming, of course, that also adolescents are included in the samples.

Using longitudinal survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) between 2002 and 2023 (Tillmann et al., 2022), study III examined the scarring effects of unemployment on social trust. While we find important implications for future research into age, unemployment scarring and social trust, we could not rule out that the observed age-specific salience of unemployment scars is caused by left-censoring. We lack, in other words, information required to discern if older respondents had previous experiences with unemployment before being surveyed for the first time by the SHP. Future research should therefore consider previous unemployment experiences to ascertain whether our life-course findings could be understood as we interpreted or that the effects of the observed younger respondents testify to the 'true' underlying negative effect of employment and social trust.

6.3 Conclusions

The aim of the thesis has been to address the previous knowledge gap regarding social trust's development between early teenagerhood and adulthood (e.g. adolescence). To guide the research, the thesis posed the following research questions: 1) *How does social trust develop between adolescence and (early) adulthood?* 2) *Which experiences determine changes in social trust?* and 3) *How lasting are those changes?* Overall, the thesis aims to contribute and extend the knowledge about how a period that holds significant sway over people's morals, attitudes and beliefs, shapes social trust during adolescence and beyond.

In line with previous research (Abdelzadeh & Lundberg, 2017; C. A. Flanagan & Stout, 2010), I find that social trust is most malleable during adolescence. However, I also identified a common pattern persisting through various cultural- and group settings. Specifically, I found that social trust tends to substantially decline during the early stages of teenagerhood. This decline was subsequently followed by a gradual, long-term, recovery of social trust through the rest of people's adult life span. Importantly, only a small minority of people were able to reach similar pre-adolescence levels of social trust in

later life. Here, the theoretical contributions of the impressionable years' hypothesis (Dinas, 2010) and the life-course perspective (Elder, 1998) emerged as fruitful contribution to the debate regarding change and stability in social trust which is mostly dominated by the oversimplifying reduction of 'experiential adaptation vs. cultural persistence' (Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Uslaner, 2002).

One possible explanation for the decline of trust in early adolescence could be that the youngest participants assume, to a large extent, that other people are just as trustworthy as their family and/or friends (Markson & Luo, 2020). However, as they come of age they are faced with the reality of the situation and slowly realize that their childlike naïve levels of trust are no longer appropriate. This further implies that the decline in social trust during most people's early teenage years may not be an inherently a negative experience in the long-term, but rather something that ought to be viewed as a necessary experience for adolescents to develop into independent individuals. The findings further suggests that satisfaction with school climate and with parental support contribute to weaken the decline in social trust that most adolescents experience. Essentially, lending cautious support for the notion the quality of one's parental and peer relationship may substantially influence people's trust trajectories (Umemura & Šerek, 2016; Uslaner, 2002). As one of the few aspects that can seemingly mitigate the decline in social trust at the onset of teenagerhood, more information about the parent-to-child relationship would greatly benefit the current reading. One of the primary recommendations for future avenues of trust research is thus that resources ought to be spent trying to understand the long-term positive, and/or negative influences that various parenting styles has on adolescents' social trust during the impressionable years.

Emphasizing how collective experiences, here operationalized by the COVID-19 pandemic, can significantly influence people's trust, I find that the dramatic decline at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic were short-lived, and people quickly revert to pre-crisis levels of social trust. While the observed pattern of short-term fluctuations and long-term stability of social trust has been addressed before (Dawson, 2019), I argue that theoretical discussions about cultural persistence vs. experiential adaptation could greatly benefit from incorporating elements of the 'set-point' theory, a theoretical framework that

has originally been developed to make sense of individual changes in subjective well-being.

Amongst individual-level experiences, I identified some groups that were more susceptible to the negative development that occurred during the pandemic: the unemployed, and people who disagreed with the Swiss government's handling of the crisis and the restrictions put in place to safeguard the population (such as school and workplace lockdowns, social distancing etcetera). Here, I found unemployment to be of particular interest and decided to delve deeper into the influences of unemployment. Consequently, me and Jan Mewes, explored the extent to which unemployment leaves a lasting scar(s) on social trust. Our findings emphasize that the timing of people's unemployment period matters – with only young people being susceptible to social-trust scarring by unemployment. Here, the impressionable years hypothesis once again emerged as a crucial theoretical addition to cultural- and experiential perspectives, where the latter would do well to emphasize the *primacy effect* and the former ought to extend the period where trust 'settles' to include adolescence and early adulthood (Birnbaum, 1974; Dinas, 2010; Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Uslaner, 2002).

In sum, this thesis provides valuable new insights into the dynamics that shape and influence social trust during adolescence and beyond. While I have highlighted the theoretical limitations of the cultural and experiential perspectives and emphasized the added value of the impressionable years' hypothesis, the life-course perspective, and the set-point theory, much remains to be explored. A deeper understanding of how social trust evolves – how it is formed, challenged and reinforced over time – is essential.

6 Swedish Summary

Denna avhandling är en sammanställning av tre individuella forskningsartiklar som undersöker i vilken utsträckning de påverkbara åren, negativa händelser och kollektiva kriser förutspår social tillit – tron på att de flesta människor går att lita på. Trots det omfattande vetenskapliga intresset för social tillit, baseras majoriteten av tidigare forskning som behandlar bildandet av social tillit över livsloppet på data från vuxna deltagare. Även om tidigare studier tenderar att fokusera på social tillits hållbarhet och motståndskraft mot förändring över tid så har överraskande få studier undersökt om detta gäller även under tonåren och bland unga vuxna. Avhandlingen ägnar därmed särskild uppmärksamhet åt frågan om hur social tillit utvecklas från och med tidiga tonåren tills att respondenterna blivit unga vuxna.

Den empiriska data som används i hela avhandlingen kommer framför allt från den longitudinella schweiziska hushållspanelen ’Swiss Household Panel’, som är särskilt värdefull eftersom den inkluderar repeterade mått från samma respondenter från det år de fyller 14, vilket gör det möjligt att analysera utvecklingen av samma individers sociala tillit från tidig tonårsålder genom de mer påverkbara åren och vidare upp i vuxen ålder. För jämförande ändamål använder jag mig även av tvärsnittsdata från ’European Social Survey’ och ’World Values Survey’.

Studie I undersökte utvecklingen av social tillit under det första året av COVID-19 pandemin. Målet var att kartlägga mönster i de individuella dynamikerna för social tillit under pandemin och att bedöma om förändringar i social tillit kunde förklaras av kulturell beständighet eller erfarenhetsbaserad anpassning. Mina resultat visade att en ovanligt stor andel av människor upplevde ett betydande fall i social tillit mellan hösten 2019 och sommaren 2020. Intressant nog observerades en lika stor ökning av social tillit mellan sommaren och hösten 2020 – vilket betonar att även om det fanns en betydande negativ reaktion under de första månaderna av COVID-19 pandemin, så

återhämtade sig de allra flesta snabbt till nivåer av tillit som rådde före pandemins utbrott. Här stämmer resultaten överens med 'set-point' teorin, som argumenterar att värderingar och attityder tenderar att fluktuera kring en stabil individuell basnivå, vilket innebär att även om variationer kan observeras på kort sikt, så har de allra flesta en tendens att återgå till sina långsiktiga basnivåer kort efter en förändring. Baserat på dessa resultat föreslår jag att 'set-point' teorin bör betraktas som en teoretiskt fruktbar förlängning av det kulturella perspektivet. Resultatet visade också att respondenter med högt subjektivt välbefinnande var mer motståndskraftiga mot den kollektiva nedgången som skedde mellan hösten 2019 och sommaren 2020 och dessutom att subjektivt välbefinnande hade en tilltagande effekt på den kollektiva återhämtningen som skedde mellan sommaren 2020 och hösten 2020. Här observerades också att unga människor hade en större återhämtningshastighet, vilket gav försiktigt stöd för hypotesen att unga människor är mer påverkbara och därför påverkas de i större utsträckning än andra åldersgrupper av aktuella händelser som till exempel under COVID-19 pandemin. Utöver detta fann jag även att respondenter som inte höll med om regeringens åtgärder för att bekämpa pandemin påverkades negativt i sin sociala tillitsnivå på kort sikt.

Studie II undersökte social tillits formbarhet mellan ungdomsåren och tidig vuxenålder. Inspirerad av teoretiska argument från 'impressionable years-hypotesen' (de påverkbara åren) och 'life-course theory' (livscykelteori), använde jag mig av tvärsnittsdata och longitudinella undersökningsdata för att undersöka: hur utvecklas social tillit mellan ungdomsåren och (tidig) vuxen ålder? Sammantaget tyder mina resultat på att, oavsett land eller grupptillhörighet, tenderar ungdomar att följa ett liknande mönster med minskad social tillit under tidiga tonåren, följt av en gradvis återhämtningsperiod som sträcker sig över hela deras vuxna liv. Mitt resultat antyder att endast en liten minoritet av människor når samma nivåer av social tillit som före ungdomsåren senare i livet. Dessutom bjuder mina resultat in till en mer nyanserad läsning och syntes av de två mest framträdande teoretiska perspektiven rörande förändring och/eller stabilitet av social tillit (kulturell stabilitet vs. erfarenhetsbaserad anpassning). Medan jag finner att den ökade formbarheten under ungdomsåren stämmer överens med det kulturella perspektivet, utmanar det universella mönstret av nedgång den nuvarande läsningen. På samma sätt, även om det erfarenhetsbaserade perspektivet

betonar erfarenheternas inverkan under hela livscykeln, hittar jag stöd för tesen att erfarenheterna från de mer formativa åren är betydligt mer inflytelserika, vilket motiverar behovet att beakta den så kallade ’primacy’ effekten, vilket framhäver ungas ökade mottaglighet för upplevelser och dess påverkan.

Studie III undersöker jag och Jan Mewes de ’ärr’ som ungdomsarbetslöshet lämnar på social tillit. Tidigare forskning har visat att arbetslöshetserfarenheter, vid någon tidpunkt i det förflutna, är en prediktor för lägre individuella nivåer av social tillit. Här hävdar vi att tidigare studier om förhållandet mellan arbetslöshet och social tillit har varit blinda för livscykelhändelser och genom att inte inkludera viktiga insikter från ’impressionable years’ hypotesen, kan det kulturella och/eller erfarenhetsbaserade perspektivet vara benägna att överskatta den sanna formbarheten av social tillit bland vuxna. Vi finner att tidpunkten för arbetslöshet spelar roll och att nackdelarna med ungdomsarbetslöshet är kumulativa, vilket betonar att långvarig arbetslöshet och upprepade arbetslöshetserfarenheter är förknippade med djupare ärr på social tillit. Även om ett jobb kan mildra ärren något, kan det inte helt läka de långsiktiga skadorna av arbetslöshet, särskilt för de vars ärr är går djupare. Våra resultat föreslår en modifierad läsning av det kulturella perspektivet på social tillit. I kontrast med tidigare forskning som hävdar att social tillit kristalliseras i slutet av barndomen, finner vi att denna period av formbarhet är mycket längre, vilket i grunden betonar behovet att förlänga detta fönster av ökad formbarhet för att inkludera de påverkbara åren. Baserat på denna diskussion argumenterar vi för en integration av insikter från litteraturen om de påverkbara åren i det teoretiska ramverket för det kulturella perspektivet: vilket understryker att social tillit verkligen påverkas av negativa erfarenheter, men endast fram till en viss ålder.

Sammanfattningsvis ger denna avhandling värdefulla nya insikter i de dynamiker som formar och påverkar social tillit under ungdomsåren och vidare i livet. Även om jag har belyst de teoretiska begränsningarna hos det kulturella och erfarenhetsbaserade perspektivet och betonat det mervärde som *impressionable years*-hypotesen, *livscykelperspektivet* och *set-point* teorin tillför, återstår mycket att utforska. En djupare förståelse för hur social tillit utvecklas – hur det formas, utmanas och förstärks över tid – är därmed essentiell.

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Appendix: Papers 1-3

Paper I

Saaranen, A. (2024). Social Trust during the Pandemic: Longitudinal evidence from three waves of the Swiss household panel study. *Journal of Trust Research*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2024.2385534

Paper II

Saaranen, A. (2025). Social Trust during the Impressionable Years and Beyond.

Paper III

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Trust in Time

Despite the widespread scholarly interest in social trust – the belief that most people can be trusted – most previous research regarding the formation of social trust over the life-course is based on data from adults. While existing relevant studies place emphasis on social trust's ability to endure and resist change over time, surprisingly few studies have examined if this holds true during adolescence and early adulthood.

This thesis fills the current research gap by exploring whether and how the impressionable years, detrimental events and collective crises predict social trust. Empirically, the thesis' main data comes from the Swiss Household Panel, which is a long-running longitudinal survey study that contains, crucially, respondents from the age of 14. For comparative purposes, the thesis also draws on cross-sectional survey data from the European Social Survey and World Values Survey. Using a range of different quantitative modelling techniques, the thesis set out to explore how social trust develops between adolescence and (early) adulthood.

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