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Securitized trust: on the multiple guises of the UK policy agenda during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the uncertainty that characterized the COVID-19 pandemic, trust emerged as a key term employed by public officials and policymakers in the UK to represent the existence or dissolution of state–society relationships. Despite its ubiquity, trust remained ambiguous in its precise meaning and multiple in its usage. Through an analysis of key policy documents published since the onset of the pandemic, we look beyond the definition of trust to explore its various roles in the UK policymaking at the national level. Drawing on the work of Vivien Schmidt (2008, 2010), we bring attention to the relationship between the cognitive (or instrumental) and normative (or valued-based) functions of trust in contradicting domains of community and security. We argue that the multiplicity of trust in policy discourse creates a false unity across conflictual domains of the government agenda, obfuscating the workings of an increasingly austere state. 'Securitized trust', we propose, is produced when the language of trust is mobilized through policies that work to enforce compliance with government agendas, to monitor organizing at the community level, to manage personal data, and to enhance policing.

Introduction

The legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic policies and policy discourses continue to linger in UK politics. The aftermath of the public health emergency has been characterized by successive revelations relating to the politicization of scientific advice (Clarke 2021; Kettell and Kerr 2022) and the flouting of restrictions by MPs and civil servants (Cairney and Kippin 2023). At the same time, research has linked oscillating and unclear policies regarding delayed lockdowns, school closures, and COVID-19 testing (Nickson, Thomas, and Mullens-Burgess 2020), as well as conflicting economic and health policies – most notably the UK government's 'Eat-Out-to-Help-Out' Scheme (Fetzer 2022) – with the spread of the virus.

Researchers have called out lockdown policies as exacerbating existing forms of inequality and generating new inequalities while perpetuating stigma and blame against minoritized and racialized groups (Bear et al. 2021; Nazroo and Bécares 2021). While there has been intense counter-investigation of political malfeasance and biological effects of government uncertainty, including in the public UK COVID-19 Inquiry (Bambra and Marmot 2023), there has been little focus on the afterlives of pandemic policy approaches and discourses, which have continued to pattern state–society relations.

Against this backdrop of routinized uncertainty, the term 'trust' took on new meanings and prominence in government discourse. Amidst successive infection spikes between 2020 and 2022, policymakers looked to epidemiological and economic modeling to inform policy at pace with pandemic spread, with behavioral economics providing a congruent framework for understanding reactions to government directives (Sibony 2020). In the push to quantify and model individual and group behavior, a diversity of social relationships and experiences were collapsed into a finite set of abstract concepts. *Trust* was among the most prolific of these concepts, invoked in pandemic science and policy as shorthand for the complex social processes which conditioned people's reactions to government mandates (Sunstein et al. 2022). Survey-based reports comparing levels of compliance across social groups cast ethnic minority groups as particularly 'mistrustful' (ONS 2021; Cooper, Dolezal, and Rose 2023). These 'objective' evocations of trust within government discourse failed to capture the complexity of decision-making in the context of persistent social and economic inequalities. Moreover, they belied the entanglement of government policy with histories of racialization and discrimination in postcolonial, post-industrial Britain.

We write as a collective of anthropologists and geographers who worked with groups of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) workers and community members throughout the pandemic. Across communities in London and Birmingham, we (the authors) noted the intense frustration expressed within communities that were characterized by policymakers and in the media as 'mistrusting' (Bear et al. 2021; Simpson et al. 2021; Sarafian 2022; Storer and Sarafian 2022; Wuerth 2022). Our research documented the ways in which government policies exacerbated existing inequalities and generated new forms of disadvantage, drawing on rapid, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork that included engagement in policy spaces (Bear et al. 2020, 2021; Simpson et al. 2020, 2021; Storer et al. 2022).[1] Collecting our research insights, we traced the multiple uses of trust across online public health briefings, policymaking coalitions, and voluntary and community sector negotiations with local authorities. In the context of this ethnographic research, trust had multiple faces: as an imposed and implicitly racialized script, but also as a social relationship linked to support and cohesion within communal networks.

This paper presents findings from a scoping exercise designed to better understand the emergent uses of trust discourse through the analysis of national policy documents published during the pandemic. This documentary analysis complements our ethnographic findings by reviewing the policies produced by the UK national government that impacted – directly and indirectly – the communities with which we worked, and which laid the foundation for the conservative government's 'Levelling Up' agenda (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2022a). Our motivation, in part, for doing so was to move beyond current attempts to assess and compare public

levels of trust *in* government *by* the public, to understand how trust is operationalized in and through government policy, and to what potential effect.

We begin by reviewing the various uses of trust across academic disciplines before making the case for an anthropological approach to the study of trust discourses. We describe the motivation and method of our documentary review, which grew out of continuing ethnographic engagement with community groups during and after the pandemic. Our distinct approach to discourse analysis – which we see as a contribution to the academic community of critical policy studies – validates the findings of discourse analysis via collective reflection, and against real-time ethnography exploring how policy concepts circulate and take effect in the 'real world'.

A brief description of the policy documents included in the search then sets the foundation for a summary of relevant findings by policy category. From this analysis, which draws on Vivien Schmidt's 'cognitive' and 'normative' notion of ideas (Schmidt 2008), emerges an understanding of trust as a *repertoire* of ideas. Beyond representing a by-product of disciplinary divisions, we assert that the apparent internal incoherence of this repertoire serves a purpose (or multiple purposes), namely, to legitimate and depoliticize government policies that hold the potential to further the marginalization and surveillance of minoritized communities. We conclude by noting the emerging danger that 'securitized trust', as a discursive bridge between different governance domains, may become linked to the advancement of political agendas which have deeply discriminatory and racist effects.

Trust: beyond disciplinary silos

Debates regarding the concept of trust and the mode of its operationalization have played out in academic circles since the 1960s (Freitag and Bauer 2018). Of the studies produced by social scientists on trust in policy discourse, most have focussed on determining or defining what trust *is*, rather than on the processual work of trust in practice. The sociologist Adam Seligman, for example, defines trust – distinct from 'confidence' or 'solidarity' – as that which facilitates interaction in unpredictable or unprecedented circumstances (Seligman 1998). His analysis operates at the abstract level of 'society' and includes trust as something which must be present to allow for interactions between 'strangers', i.e. to explain the behavior of an individual in relation to an unknown or not-entirely-known 'other'. This approach – theorizing trust as a 'thing' possessed by autonomous individuals – has been applied widely by social scientists, including behavioral economists, political scientists, and social psychologists instrumentalising individualist notions of trust to understand phenomena such as consumer behavior or democratic participation (Florian, Bakker, and Berejikian 2018).

In recent decades, trust has also been operationalized across the literature in political science and public policy as a tool for assessment and comparison. Francis Fukuyama has famously theorized trust as a principle of strong economic and political governance, applying his definition of trust – 'the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms' (Fukuyama 1995, 26) – to draw comparisons across several of the world's major economies. Trust has appeared in public administration and policy literature as a component of healthy state–society relations and public receptiveness to government managerialism

(Bouckaert 2012). Trust between government services and society has been linked to 'public sector performance' (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003), used to compare 'trust regimes' across OECD countries (Bergh and Bjørnskov 2011; Van de Walle and Lahat 2017), and upheld as the fundamental underpinning of good governance (Blind 2006; Stephen and Zak 2003). Studies showing falling levels of trust over time have lent weight to claims that societies are becoming less cohesive amidst 'growing economic inequality, social anxiety, [and] defensive narcissism and consumerism' (Pelsmaekers, Jacobs, and Rollo 2014, 2). These modes of quantification were operationalized by political scientists and policy researchers during the pandemic to highlight associations between government policies, compliance, and public trust in government (Devine et al. 2021). Despite their popularity, these studies suffer from a lack of clarity regarding the objects of public trust (e.g. politicians, social institutions, general 'government') and from a lack of depth in their treatment of trust as 'unidimensional' (ibid, 281).

Anthropologists, in parallel, have taken up the study of trust both as a dense social relationship and mode of social solidarity (e.g. Coates 2019), and as the epistemological underpinning for contemporary capitalist economies and political regimes (e.g. Corsín Jiménez 2011). Anthropologists recognize that theorizing trust as a condition or relationship of individuals, divorced from the geographic and historical context in which the idea takes on meaning, is to deny the power relations and structurally reproduced inequities from which trust ideas derive their relative significance and implications (Liisberg, Oluffa Pedersen, and Line Dalsgård 2015). An anthropological approach highlights discussions of ethics and alterity as experienced by people in distinct localities, described in rich ethnographic detail over the course of extended fieldwork. The fraught workings and temporalities of trust highlighted by ethnographers (Storer and Simpson 2022) complicate existing theories of trust decline and problematize political appeals, particularly directly at minoritized communities, to 'build trust' within systems of governance.

The anthropology of policy, incorporating documentary research with ethnographic observations, draws critical attention not just to the 'content' or definition of trust, but also to the contextual and contradictory uses of trust discourse in practice (Shore and Susan 1997; Shore, Susan, and Davide 2011; Tate 2020). While recognizing the disciplinary tensions in defining and operationalizing trust, we turn our attention as anthropologists of policy to the discursive and interactive processes through which the concept is instrumentalised by policymakers. This focus represents a shift away from delineating epistemes of trust, toward understanding the life of ideas in policy and their effects. Like many anthropological analyses of policy, this paper is inspired by long-term engagement in the field. It takes the policies we analyze as both *object* and *project* (Bellier and Thomas 2020), as we strive to inform shifts in the logics and priorities of policymaking to redress the inequities voiced by our interlocutors in various fieldsites across the UK. In doing so, we turn to Vivien Schmidt's theory of 'normative' and 'cognitive' ideas, which are a constituent part of her work on 'discursive institutionalism' (Schmidt 2008).

Though situated within political science, Schmidt – like many anthropologists of policy – takes institutions to be dynamic, shaped, and maintained by actors who internalize certain structures of meaning and enact them through their daily interactions and communications (2008, 3). She challenges the rigidity of political analysis based on the assumptions of 'path-dependency' and 'neutral, formal structures' of policymaking, foregrounding the thoughts and actions of 'sentient agents' influenced as much by values

and norms as by the 'rational' pursuit of political objectives (Schmidt 2010). In the context of multi-layered policies, developed by multiple stakeholders, Schmidt distinguishes between *cognitive* ideas, which are instrumental in defining a policy problem and proposing solutions, and *normative* ideas contributing to the production of legitimizing norms and value judgments. Schmidt describes cognitive ideas as primarily instrumental and solution-focussed, invoking 'relevant scientific disciplines or technical practices' (2008, 307). Normative ideas, on the other hand, appeal to underlying philosophical notions of value and appropriateness, coexisting alongside, and potentially in conflict, with the 'interest-based logics' of cognitive ideas.

We find Schmidt's approach useful for understanding the discursive deployment of trust during the pandemic. In the context of the national lockdown, cognitive ideas of trust as a metric and indicator 'provide[d] the recipes, guidelines, and maps for political action and serve to justify policies and programs by speaking to their interest-based logic and necessity' (Schmidt 2008, 306). In our ethnographic work, 'trust' as a normative idea emerged in both direct and more subtle speech acts – in appeals to public morality and allusions to unspoken social contracts between those who govern and the governed, differently rendered depending on class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and migrant status. Having witnessed these two 'types' of trust surface in online public health briefings, policymaking coalitions, and across voluntary and community sector negotiations with local authorities, we sought to explore the repertoire of trust as represented in the national policy documents framing the COVID-19 response and recovery. In reading across this selection of policy documents, we observed how what we call 'securitized trust' emerged from the interactive processes of coordinating language across divergent policy realms (Schmidt 2008), under the guise of a common agenda of trust-building.

Method: tracing trust

In the following sections, we present summary findings from a scoping exercise designed to better understand the use and meaning of 'trust' in UK Government policy documents published during the pandemic and its immediate aftermath. A search of the Gov.uk 'Policy Papers and Consultations' database[2] for documents using the term 'trust' and published between February 2020 and July 2022 yielded 540 results. The document review involved scanning these results to identify policy documents which included the word 'trust' as an idea or concept, as opposed to as a proper noun (as in NHS or educational Trust). Of the 20 documents thus selected, all were read once in their entirety to determine the general context in which the idea of trust was invoked. The documents were closely read a second time and annotated manually as part of the inductive thematic analysis. Key themes were identified iteratively across the documents. M. Wuerth led the research, and, through monthly meetings with E. Storer and N. Simpson, clarified emergent themes.[3] At these meetings, M. Wuerth presented summaries of the policy documents she had reviewed, alongside illustrative excerpts from the texts themselves. These were discussed at length with E. Storer and N. Simpson, who were at the time conducting fieldwork in policy forums and within communities feeling the immediate effects of pandemic-time policies. As a group of academics trained in ethnographic method, we were committed to reading deeply into these texts and drawing out their implicit meanings. Rather than striving for 'replicability', we, as anthropologists,

recognize that our analysis is informed by our positionalities and experiences as researchers, and that the richness of our insights derives in part from our embeddedness in the communities impacted by the policies we study.

Out of the documents reviewed, special analytic attention was given to four 'key' policy texts, inductively selected as they represented ideas of trust and marked significant policy stances with far-reaching repercussions for regional and local policymaking and program funding. These were: (1) the Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (known as the 'Sewell Report'), first published in March 2021 (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021); (2) the Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, published in February 2022 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022); (3) the Inclusive Britain report, summarizing the government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, published in March 2022 (HM Government 2022); and (4) the Rapid Evidence Review of Community Initiatives, published in June 2022 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022). These reports were selected because they are formative of UK government policy and had been directly or indirectly referenced on multiple occasions by interlocutors in the course of our research. They were also the most widely cited reports and have influence on policymaking beyond the specific policy arenas implicated in this study.[4]

Findings: trust in UK government policy

Key documents

The Sewell Report, first published in March 2021, summarized the findings of a special commission assembled by Prime Minister Boris Johnson against the immediate backdrop of George Floyd's murder and a summer of Black Lives Matter protests. The report was widely criticized, including by the influential think tank Runnymede Trust, for being a 'script that has been written for 10 Downing Street' and for implying that the UK is 'post racial', while 'failing to acknowledge the very real suffering of Black and minority ethnic communities' (Runnymede Trust 2021). 'Build Trust' was one of the four headings used to group the Report's 24 recommendations, along with 'Promote Fairness', 'Create Agency', and 'Achieve Inclusivity'. Published exactly one year later, in March 2022, the second key document – Inclusive Britain: government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (HM Government 2022) – detailed 72 actions to guide implementation of the Sewell Report recommendations across government departments. The response emphasized their relevance to the government's 'levelling up' agenda, which was laid out in the Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022) – our third key document – published in February 2022.

The Levelling Up White Paper marked a significant moment of government rebranding, ongoing since the government 'reshuffle' in September 2021. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government was recast as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and Public Health England was disbanded, its functions redistributed across the NHS and the new UK Health Security Agency. In

light of these changes, the Levelling Up White Paper emphasized the strengths of 'multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-ethnic' Britain (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022, xii) and framed 'levelling up' as a solution to persistent inequalities of opportunity. The agenda proposed to promote economic growth and productivity across regions of the UK through significant investments in local infrastructure and empowerment of local leaders and communities. The fourth key document – the Rapid Evidence Review of Community Initiatives (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022) – was published in response to the White Paper in June 2022. This publication marked an attempt to map existing evidence on community initiatives to improve local infrastructure and productivity and to operationalize terms used generally in the White Paper by breaking vague concepts – including 'trust' – into measurable parts to aid in the systematic evaluation of community-level investment.

The 16 other documents reviewed as part of the scoping exercise (see supplemental table) allowed us to analyze how trust was used as a concept across policy areas, including housing, digital security, and law enforcement. These reports, produced by various government departments and ministries, included the Online Harms White Paper published in December 2020 (Home Office, and Culture, Media and Sport Department for Digital 2020), the Tackling Loneliness Network Action Plan published in May 2021 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021), and the Health and Social Care Integration Plan, published in February 2022 (Department of Health and Social Care 2022a), among others.

All documents

Consistent with our ethnographic observations over the COVID-19 pandemic, during which policymakers and government officials refrained from explicitly defining trust (Storer and Simpson 2022; Wuerth 2022), 'trust' was given meaning by the discursive context in which it appeared. We found that trust was mentioned in relation to a variety of government aims, comprising the programmatic underpinnings of a broader agenda that came, by the end of the pandemic, to be known as 'Levelling Up'. We consistently found that 'trust' was mentioned in relation to four general themes: (1) Compliance and cooperation with social care and health service providers; (2) Funding, monitoring, and evaluation of community programs; (3) Surveillance, digital media, and online safety; and (4) Policing and racial injustice. We explore each of these themes below, using the context provided by the four key texts to draw connections across all 20 policy documents included in our scoping exercise. Crucially, we illuminate inherent tensions in the contemporaneous use of the term across sectors of policymaking, pointing to the breadth and complexity of the trust idea in policy discourse.

3.2.1. Trust as compliance and cooperation in health and social care
The first set of documents in which the language of trust was employed dealt with compliance and cooperation in health and social care. The idea of trust appeared in policy documents published in the early stages of the pandemic to frame issues of compliance with government regulations related to social distancing, and subsequent

processes of social isolation and marginalization. In several documents (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022; Department of Health and Social Care 2021, 2022c; Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2020), policymakers addressed these social vulnerabilities by outlining measures to improve social cohesion and connectedness between marginalized groups and individuals with local and community support services. This reflects a wider emphasis, propelled by a national government mandate but carried out by local authorities, on facilitating local care networks and integration of healthcare and social support. This movement was lent new urgency by concerns that lockdown measures had ushered in a 'second pandemic' of loneliness and mental health problems. Emerging Together: The Tackling Loneliness Network Action Plan, released in May 2021, exemplified this response by stating that 'long periods of loneliness and isolation can result in people losing confidence, making it more difficult for them to trust and build connections with others' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021).

The concerns about social fragmentation, and about the atrophy of relations between the state and citizens at both national and local authority level through successive lockdowns, set the groundwork for policy emphasizing the restructuring and 'joining up' of social services related to health and well-being. In the Joining up Care for People, Places and Populations policy paper, published in February 2022, outlining the government's proposals for health and care integration, 'building transparency and trust through ongoing dialogue with citizens' (Department of Health and Social Care 2022a, 46) was emphasized as a government priority alongside building 'a strong culture of trust and mutual accountability' (ibid, 35) among healthcare providers. The report described plans by the Department of Health and Social Care, pending the passage of key bills, to create funding pools for more integrated service delivery, with the aim of devolving key decision-making to local health networks, providing 'patient-centred care', and 'reducing health disparities' through new regulatory structures (ibid, 8). The Sewell Report drew clear links between 'mistrust' of ethnic minority communities and the underuse of health services, particularly mental healthcare; finding no evidence to support claims of 'discrimination in psychiatry', the report recommended initiatives aimed at 'convincing vulnerable people in ethnic minorities that mental healthcare provision is neither a threat nor a punishment' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, 224). In both of these reports, 'lack of trust' was cast as a barrier to effective and efficient use of increasingly integrated health services.

'Trust' as a key ingredient of service integration was extended in relation to new 'Community Champions' program which 'us[ed] trusted local voices to deliver public health messaging and encourage vaccine uptake' (Department of Health and Social Care 2022c). The Community Champions scheme, launched in October 2020, was intended to place 'grassroots' actors at the forefront of local campaigns to counter misinformation and encourage adherence to government-issued public health advice. In 2021, Community Champions were framed as 'ambassadors' of the vaccination effort, and online meetings became spaces in which local concerns about vaccination and the continuance of lockdown measures were fed back to local councillors (Wuerth 2022). Throughout, government officials, nationally and locally, strove to 'reach into the heart of communities' (Department of Health and Social Care 2022c) and determine where

'trusted' figures could help attain government targets for control of infection and promotion of vaccination. This mapping was at odds with the advice of social scientists regarding best practice in community-led public health campaigns, which included increasing government funding and transparency as recognition of the additional responsibilities placed on local actors by their enrollment as Community Champions (ADPH London 2023; SAGE 2021).

Trust in these documents was invoked as both a cognitive and normative idea; it appealed to government authorities concerned with social fragmentation and its costs while invoking fundamental and uncontroversial social values like community, solidarity, and mutual aid. It did this at the expense of directly naming the forms of racialized inequality that were experienced in the pandemic, as generated by pandemic policies.

Funding, monitoring, and evaluation of community programs

The second group of documents in which trust appeared concerned the funding, monitoring, and evaluation of community programs through the measurement of social capital. In this sense, trust was applied as a quantitative measurement for the purposes of comparison and assessment, aimed at holding community actors accountable to the state for investment that had been introduced in the early stages of the crisis. The term appeared in this sense increasingly in the latter period of the pandemic; when the urgency of the first and second lockdowns subsided, the inequalities that were left in its wake became clear, and policy attention turned to recovery. For example, trust was mentioned in the Levelling Up White Paper as a key component of 'social capital' – an aggregate of 'the strength of communities, relationships and trust' – that would 'help drive levelling up' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022, xv). The Levelling Up White Paper employed the idea of trust in a mode consistent with the ONS's assessment of 'social capital' across the UK from April 2020 to March 2021, which concluded:

> While people in rural areas appear to have stronger social network support than those in urban areas, our data show over-time improvements in the urban-rural gap in *levels of trust and cooperative norms* (emphasis added). (Office of National Statistics 2022)

In both the Levelling Up White Paper (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022) and the ONS Social Capital report (Office of National Statistics 2022), 'trust' was measured as the property of an individual and used to draw conclusions about regions and areas based on aggregations of individual-level responses. Social capital, as a measurement of 'social connectedness and local satisfaction' in the Levelling Up White Paper (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022, 69) indicated discrepancies between regions, showing, for example, that 'rural areas perform much better than urban areas on measures of local area satisfaction' (ibid). These comparisons supported recommendations to 'restore local pride' through urban regeneration and workforce strengthening (166).

The Rapid Evidence Review of Community Initiatives paper, paying homage to Putnam (2001), stated that 'social capital is intangible and generally characterised by trust, social networks and personal relationships' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022).

Reviewing the available evidence of local interventions to boost social infrastructure (for example, the establishment of a community center or library), the report concluded that 'robust evaluation of outcomes of community initiatives' (ibid) was generally lacking. While measures of social capital were created and adapted to assess community-level outcomes, local processes of evaluation remained unstandardized and largely unregulated, making it difficult to assess the real and potential impact of funding (Bussu 2015). To address the 'notable gap in the evidence' about the determinants of social capital, the Rapid Evidence Review called for more rigorous process evaluations, alongside 'fieldwork to understand how community members in different groups experience community infrastructure' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022).

In documents regarding measurement and evaluation, trust appeared in its cognitive role, as a rational component of statistical models used to account for sociodemographic inequalities. Trust as a discrete indicator of social cohesion was used to make the diverse regions of the UK comparable, appealing to interest-based logics of ranking and prioritization that could allow government funding to be allocated more 'efficiently' and 'rationally'.

Surveillance, digital media, and online safety

The third set of policy documents in which the idea of trust appeared related to processes of surveillance and online safety, specifically referring to the collection, storage, and use of data through digital innovation and artificial intelligence. Documents outlining government efforts to address potential security threats and encourage digital innovation were published throughout the pandemic period. In July 2020, an independent report of the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation framed the problem for UK policymakers to address:

> A lot of personal data is shared across and outside the public sector. While this may be for beneficial purposes, public awareness of it is generally low. This gives rise to an environment of 'tenuous trust'. (Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation 2020)

The report went on to separate out two different kinds of 'trust': trust in *competency* and trust in the *intentions* of public sector institutions. This report recognized the key challenges for the national government in the post-Covid era of increasing reliance on online services: maintaining the security of public sector data and enforcing data protection regulations, in the context of 'recent efforts to increase data sharing across the government and wider public sector' (ibid). Concerns about the credibility of online information dovetailed with skepticism, exacerbated by the failures of the UK Government's COVID-19 'Test and Trace' strategy (Mahase 2021), toward national-level monitoring of personal data. In this context, the document proposed a framework for boosting 'trust' and 'restoring faith' in the government as a protector of data and regulator of online abuse (Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation 2020).

The Online Harms White Paper, published in December 2020, addressed the role of pandemic, which had by then 'shone a spotlight on the risks posed by harmful activity and content online' (Home Office, and Culture, Media and Sport Department for Digital 2020). The idea of 'trust' emerged in discussion of the 'risks posed to children online' and

in relation to the need 'to make [media] companies take responsibility for the safety of their users', while preserving free speech (ibid).

Trust, in relation to online monitoring and data sharing, appeared as a cognitive idea appealing to rational notions of security and efficiency while drawing on normative values of safeguarding (particularly of children) and solidarity against new virtual 'threats'.

Policing and racial injustice

The final set of policy documents in which trust appeared addressed issues of policing and racial injustice. The Black Lives Matter movement and ongoing protests against police brutality in the summer of 2020 prompted government policy-makers to address widespread discontent with policing (Dray 2021; Home Office 2022b; Pyper and Brown 2020). In the government's response, policies cast the 'mistrust' of ethnic minority communities and individuals as a significant barrier to implementation of government policies and a source of 'broader issues'. Policing was a major focus of the Sewell Report, published in March 2021, which summar-ized evidence on disparities in policing across ethnic groups and outlined broad steps toward 're-establishing mutual trust between communities and police service areas' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, 137). The 'Crime and Policing' chapter relied heavily on the language of 'trust' ('trust', 'distrust' and 'mistrust' are used 22 times in this section alone), and closely related the work of trust-building with improved monitoring of policing practices and accountability of police to local 'Safeguarding Trust' groups which could request access to body camera footage; alongside these 'community watch' initiatives, 'the Home Office should also provide support in identifying those areas where trustworthiness is low and set targets to close the confidence gap' (17). The absence of trust created a gap which policymakers proposed to fill with improved mechanisms of data collection and evaluation.

The idea of 'trust' was tied closely to processes of monitoring and evaluating policing practices and public order, and 'mistrust' on the part of disproportionately policed groups was cast as an obstruction to the achievement of quality standards. In the introductory statement, for example, the Commissioners lay out a dual mandate in addressing the 'new challenge of 'participation'': 'The police need to demonstrate that they are truly a more welcoming organisation and Black communities need to overcome the legacy of mistrust' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, 7; Home Office 2022a). Several policy papers, including Public Order Bill: Equality Impact Assessment (Home Office, and Justice and Law Public Safety Group Department of Crime 2022), the Stop and Search Section 60 Relaxation: Equality Impact Assessment (Home Office 2022a), and the Overarching Equality Statement: Sentencing, Release, Probation and Youth Justice Measures (Home Office, and Department of Justice 2022) similarly framed the problem with policing as one of 'little trust in the Criminal Justice System' (ibid) and referred back to previous government reports on ethnic disparities, including the Sewell Report and Lammy Review (2017), to demonstrate commitment to dissolving tensions between law enforcement and minority ethnic communities.

Trust was employed, again, in its cognitive sense as a measure that could be improved in moving from a problematic relational state of 'mistrust' to a productive state of 'trust

in the police and co-operation with them', as a precondition of 'effective community policing' (Home Office 2022a).

Discussion: contradictions in use and meaning

The results presented above demonstrate the different uses and discursive of 'trust' as employed across this set of national policies. By reviewing each thematic category in turn, we gained a deeper sense of the role of trust in the processes of agenda-setting, mediating between discrete policy and 'deep core' worldviews (Schmidt 2008, 306). Studying how trust is represented in policy discourse is a critical step, we argue, toward understanding the 'interactive processes' through which certain 'programmatic ideas' (ibid) take hold and gain political traction. The discussion below represents an attempt to read beyond the idea of trust – past consideration of its possible definitions – to gain a sense of the discourse in which it is embedded.

The policy documents concerning compliance and cooperation in the realm of health and social care speak to the *normative* role of trust in the reinforcement and adaptation of norms throughout the pandemic. The contrast drawn within policy texts between beneficial relationships of trust and unproductive misalignments of belief and/or action served to positively inflect cooperation with government programs of service reorganization and integration. Trust as a normative idea served as a mediator between discrete policies and deeper ideals associated with the 'public good', effectively 'attach[ing] values to political action and serv[ing] to legitimate the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness' (Schmidt 2008, 307). The language of mutuality and accountability which bracketed the idea of trust in these documents spoke to an ideal of national inclusivity and solidarity against the pandemic threat; the role of trust in outlining new government programs, however, relied on the categorization of certain public figures as 'trusted' or reliable in contrast to an unspoken opposite, made clearer in the second, third, and fourth set of documents.

The cognitive role of trust emerged in documents in which the idea of trust indicated a problem to be solved and framed a potential solution in the form of a government program or recommended course of action. Across policy documents related to funding and monitoring community programs, measures used to assess the relative strength of trust across regions and populations constructed the 'problem' of insufficient social capital as the basis of government intervention. The ideational deconstruction of social capital into isolable components – 'trust, social networks, and personal relationships' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022) – presented trust as a variable that is separable from the relational environments in which it is or is not present. In this sense, the idea of trust was embedded within a discourse of 'evidence-based' governance and managerialism, in which new modes of data gathering and analysis could be used to enact different versions of the 'public' subject to government policies. Intervention, in the form of community programs *and* new forms of government surveillance, was justified in areas and among populations where social capital, and trust as one of its components, was found to be lacking. By naming an 'evidence gap' around the determinants of social capital, the language of policy documents advancing new government programs marked

out fresh terrain in which the cognitive idea of trust could do its work of isolating actionable 'problems'.

In the third thematic category, we found that the cognitive idea of trust extended in relation to the generation of online data and production of digital knowledge, explaining and legitimizing the government's role as a guardian of the public interest and the privacy of digital citizens (Department of Health and Social Care 2022b; Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, 136 and 169–172). The idea of trust bracketed a modern social contract between internet users and the national government, in which the government assumes responsibility for safeguarding personal data and employing it conscientiously in pursuit of a collective good. The cognitive function of trust as a measure of public confidence in the government's data protection agenda dovetailed with its role as an indicator and enabler of a free market of information, in which the government serves as a guardian of the public good by keeping corporate entities accountable to their users. The cognitive idea of trust in policy documents, used as an indicator of the strength of social contract between (digital) citizens and the government, framed both 'what is and what to do' (Schmidt 2008, 306); with lack of digital oversight and online safety procedures cast as the 'problem', increased government regulation and discretion in monitoring the flow of online information presents as the natural solution.

The role of trust in this problem/solution discourse – exemplified within the Online Harms White Paper and the subsequent Data Saves Lives report (Department of Health and Social Care 2022b) – was to delineate the 'players' (Jabko 2006) in the government-civil society relationships, separating the 'trusted' (government) from the 'trusting' (civil society) and framing both as essential and active in the production of digital security. In this securitized discourse, an emergent form of 'digital citizenship' (Calzada 2021) took precedence over alternative, relational meanings that could validate the historical and social reasons for mistrust in digital collection and manipulation of data for both public and private interests. In doing so, the groundwork was effectively set to cast technology – including body cameras and incident monitoring tools – and encrypted data-sharing as innovative means to move policing and border control 'away from the physical frontier' (Cabinet Office 2021), as was proposed in the fourth set of documents.

Trust as an instrumental or cognitive idea played an important role in defining the problems to be addressed through innovation and improvements to the government's data strategy, which was extended explicitly to policing and surveillance. In the case of the UK policing, where ethnic disparities in stop-and-search and prosecution have been well documented (Eastwood, Shiner, and Bear 2013; Nijjar 2021; Vomfell and Stewart 2021), the government policy documents reviewed conformed to the model of 'trust-repair discourse' (Fuoli and Paradis 2014); first, the policy language *neutralised the negative* aspects of policing by dismissing calls for justice and structural reform as 'fatalistic narratives' and 'pessimism about what has been and what more can be achieved' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, 27); second, it *emphasised the positive* by celebrating innovative modes of data collection that showed low numbers of 'specific instances of discrimination' (ibid: 45). Within these documents, a lack of public trust in government policing, as an indicator of a defective social contract between government

and civil society, transferred culpability for the breakdown of productive relation-ships to the protestors and 'young people' said to have 'amplified ... intergenera-tional mistrust' and 'alienat[ed] the decent centre ground' (ibid: 27). The cognitive function of trust – in framing the 'problem' to be fixed by government policy as one of unruly bodies – reinforced its normative function in differentiating cooperative behavior from subversive actions while omitting serious discussion of structural racism within policing institutions.

More than a by-product of disciplinary divisions, we argue that the observed slippage in meanings of trust – and the apparent internal incoherence of the trust repertoire – serves a purpose (or multiple purposes) similar to the tactical ambiguity of the 'market idea' in European policymaking (Jabko 2006). In his study of the emergence of the European single market in the 1980s and 1990s, Jabko traces how the European Commission (EC) reconciled the conflicting interests of opposing groups – integration-ists and free-market capitalists – by appealing to a vague project of 'market-building' palatable to both sides (2006). The breadth of the vision articulated by the EC, and its appeal to uncontroversial common values of cooperation and mutual profitability, facilitated unlikely coalitions in the short-term, while indefinitely deferring more con-tentious debates around the practicalities and long-term implications of a single market. The project of trust-building to which policymakers gestured throughout the pandemic, like 'market-building', appears uncontroversial on its surface yet holds vastly contrasting meanings to various stakeholders. We argue that policy discourse relying on references to trust or trust-building hangs together as a 'very effective repertoire of loosely articulated ideas' (ibid, 26) from which policymakers can pick and choose to advance political goals. These selective moves to mobilize the language of trust – which invokes the positive resonances of a social ideal preceding and transcending the pandemic moment – toward political ends produce what we refer to as 'securitized trust'.

Trust discourse as an interactive process allows policy actors to speak of issues like compliance with social programs, policing of minority communities, and revisions to data sharing procedures as 'objects at a distance' that nonetheless hold something intrinsic in common. This coordinated discourse of trust does its 'work' on two levels, as Schmidt outlines (2008, 316): first, it facilitates everyday communication within and across government departments by providing a shared signifier – trust – that manages to retain normative and cognitive resonances specific to its policy context. Secondly, trust discourse enables public-facing 'meta-analysis' of the challenges facing the institutions of government themselves, which can then be translated into persuasive arguments about what needs to be done to improve state–society relations and written up as policy. This meta-analysis strategically abstracts social dynamics from histories of exclusion, margin-alization, and neglect – framing players as politically neutral. This, in turn, generates stigma against certain groups through oblique discursive means. In the 'unprecedented' chapter of politicking opened by the pandemic, the recognition of trust advanced in this paper, as a repertoire of ideas produced through interaction – rather than through a coherent top-down mandate – places these selected documents in historical context and highlights the agency of government actors in using trust discourse to advance political interests. Referring to this discourse as 'securitized trust' draws attention to the extension of governance and surveillance carried out in the name of building or enhan-cing trust.

Crucially, each of these documents contributes to the foundational premises of 'Levelling Up' as the dominant framework of the Conservative leadership. The Sewell Report (2021) set the stage in many ways for the official publication of the Levelling Up agenda (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up 2022), which drew the parameters for the subsequent Inclusive Britain recommendations (HM Government 2022); first by associating dissenting voices with 'mistrust' without holding governmental actors accountable for historical and ongoing structural injustices, and, second, by supplying the policy precedent to displace responsibility for addressing post-pandemic challenges onto those whose 'trust' in government was found – using new methods of measurement and mapping – to be lacking (Runnymede 2022). Despite the inclusive rhetoric used in pandemic-time policy, community-based programs continue to experience the strains of austerity budget cuts (Local Government Association 2022) and Levelling Up funding allocation continues to destabilize relationships between national and regional governments (Murray 2023).

Reinforcing what was gleaned through ethnographic observation, the national policy documents we reviewed reproduced diverse formulations of the trust idea, with political consequences. The various employments of trust – as a statistical measure, facilitator of efficient digital governance, and enabler of policing reform – across policymaking bodies served to naturalize slippages in representations of caring (e.g. funding for community programs) and uncaring (e.g. expansions of digital surveillance) forms of state–society intersection. These slippages – false continuities between cognitive and normative ideas of trust across its broad repertoire – together perpetuate much more insidious processes of securitization and blame, too often leveled at minority groups (Independent SAGE 2021; Vandrevala et al. 2022). Reflecting on this study, we call for a more careful, critical perspective toward such nebulous policy repertoires, exercising caution on how policy discourse can generate and entrench inequality.

Conclusion

'Trust' emerged as a popular idea during a moment of global crisis and in relation to a diverse array of political programs, including those intended to enhance the efficiency of recovery efforts and strengthen public confidence in online governance. A variety of new attempts to measure and quantify trust, against the backdrop of continued ambiguity in the social sciences regarding its definition, has allowed a range of interests and aims to coexist without apparent conflict in national policy documents published over the course of the pandemic. Our documentary analysis, grounded in anthropological method and situated in relevant theoretical frameworks, aimed to reveal the repertoires of governance underlying these surface-level inconsistencies. Our contribution to the field of critical policy studies lies not just in our formulation of 'securitized trust' but in our ethnographically informed approach to policy analysis, which draws on our collective experiences working in marginalized communities impacted by pandemic-time policies.

We found 'trust' was employed within policy texts and across areas of policymaking as both a normative and cognitive idea, obscuring potentially controversial elements of a security and compliance-focussed government agenda. In occluding controversy and discontent, we argue, this diffusion of trust within government policymaking enabled,

and continues to enable, the silencing of dissenting and activist voices arising to represent minoritised groups. While COVID-19 has receded from the policy agenda, the discursive patterning of pandemic-time governance continues to reproduce the conditions of marginalization affecting the UK's hardest-hit communities while absorbing and refracting many of the controversies of the crisis response.

As we look further into the 'post-Covid' future, our identification of a securitized trust discourse provides the basis for a critical examination of the programmatic strategy underpinning the UK government's Levelling Up agenda and its implications for communities across the country. As we move into a post-Covid Britain, where xenophobic bordering policies and austere social welfare policies deepen existing racial divides, it is more important than ever to name forms of racism and securitization perpetuated by policy discourses.

Notes

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2. Publicly accessible at www.gov.uk/search/policy-papers-and-consultations [last accessed 25 October 2023).
3. Authors 2 and 3 led the design of this research. Author 1 led the systematic review. Authors 1,2,3 contributed to the writing of this paper. Authors 4 and 5 reviewed early drafts of the manuscript.
4. This search was not intended to be a systematic or comprehensive review of literature on trust or the use of trust across levels of government; the aim of the search was to enhance the authors' understanding of trust in policy discourse at the national level during the first years of the pandemic.

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