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'I do not trust any of them anymore': Institutional distrust and corrective practices in pro-asylum activism in Finland

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journals.sagepub.com/home/csi**Päivi Pirkkalainen** 

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Abstract

Although there is extensive research on how institutional trust and distrust play out in the forms political participation takes, the existing research lacks thorough analysis on what trust and distrust actually consist of, that is, how individuals evaluate institutions as trustworthy or not and what consequences this evaluation has for individuals and their relation to the state more broadly. Drawing on qualitative research on Finnish citizens who engage in pro-asylum activism, we examine how institutional distrusting evolves as a reflexive process. By analysing citizens' trust judgements on institutional practices and actions that follow, we argue that distrust in institutions enhances activists' attempts to engage in corrective practices, in other words taking over the functions of institutions when noticing mistakes or unfairness in institutional practices. Corrective practices reinforce activists' distrust in the asylum-related institutions and make them question the 'myth' of Finland as an equal and inclusive country. Engaging in corrective practices is emotionally and economically taxing. Despite negative consequences of institutional distrust, activists continue their work indicating that they continue to trust the democratic system in Finland and its capability to absorb their claims in the long run. Institutional distrust and generalised trust can then coexist.

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Activism, asylum seekers, institutional distrust, institutions, process

Introduction

Interpersonal, horizontal and vertical trust in institutions are prerequisites for political participation, civic political culture and democracy – in sum, for a ‘good’ society (e.g. Levi and Stoker, 2000; Sztompka, 1999). Since the 1960s, social and political sciences have examined the relationship between political participation and institutional trust and distrust. Researchers have debated how trust and distrust connect to institutionalised political participation (such as voting) and participation in non-institutionalised politics (such as protests and boycotts) (Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Levi and Stoker, 2000). On one hand, scholars have argued that at least some level of trust is needed for any kind of political participation (Verba et al., 1995). On the other hand, researchers have claimed that distrustful citizens tend to participate in non-institutionalised politics rather than formal, institutionalised politics (Braun and Hutter, 2016; Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Kaase, 1999; Norris, 2011).

Recent research has offered a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between institutional trust and participation in non-institutionalised politics, arguing that both trust and distrust can act as motivators for participating in protests depending on a person’s background, such as level of education (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2018) or unemployment (Giustozzi and Gangl, 2021). According to Della Porta (2012: 38), activists have low levels of trust in formal political institutions, but ‘high confidence in one’s own efficacy’. Pro-migrant activists tend to trust institutions less than the general population (Passy and Monsch, 2020: 99; Toubøl, 2019: 1206). Toubøl (2019) found that the Danish refugee solidarity movement mobilised citizens for whom the loss of institutional trust was a key trigger in transforming their activism towards a more confrontational style. ‘Moral shocks’ can shift activists’ view of the authorities from positive to negative and make institutions the target of outrage and discontent (Abdou and Rosenberger, 2019: 113; Jasper, 1998).

However, the existing research has somewhat overlooked what trust and distrust actually consist of, that is, how individuals evaluate institutions as trustworthy or not, and what consequences this evaluation has for individuals and their relation to the state more broadly. As most of the previous literature on trust and formal political participation is quantitative, it has sidelined the actual processes of how and why distrust occurs and the consequences of distrust. Qualitative research on activism and trust/distrust in turn often takes activists’ distrust in state institutions as a starting point, thus not explaining the actual processes of how distrust develops. Activism is often romanticised without fully considering the potential implications of the erosion of institutional trust on individual lives.

In this article, by focusing on Finland, a country which has ranked high in international comparisons of institutional trust, we investigate at the grassroots level how citizens have experienced a gradual loss of institutional trust in a specific policy field, that of asylum policies. We analyse interviews with 38 people with no or hardly any prior experience in asylum activism and ask how institutional distrust evolves and what kind

of consequences institutional distrust has for individuals and for their relation with the state. We approach trust as a reflexive process (Möllering, 2006) and analyse trust judgements that citizens make on institutional practices and actions that follow (Levi and Stoker, 2000). We argue that distrust evolves as a process in which people evaluate practices of institutions and engage in *corrective practices* when noticing mistakes or unfairness in institutional practices, which can further deepen distrust. We further argue that this process contains both rational and emotional dimensions and has various consequences for individuals affecting their relation to the state.

In what follows, we present the context of our research and the theoretical conceptualisation of trust that we apply. We then discuss our methods and data, followed by a discussion of our empirical findings and conclusions.

Research context

Finland offers an interesting case study of trust because it is among the countries with the highest levels of institutional trust according to population surveys in Europe (European Commission, 2018: 47–48). Trust in justice, the army and the police are at a very high level in Finland compared to other European countries (Jackson et al., 2011). For several years now, the police, the president and the judicial system have been among the most trusted institutions in Finland (European Commission, 2018: 47–48; Jackson et al., 2011). The Finnish society is commonly described as a ‘trust-based society’ in which trust among citizens is a basis of the welfare state. In recent years, however, there have been signals that the trust-based society is in crisis. According to a Finnish values survey in 2016, citizens’ trust in institutions has decreased (Taloudellinen tiedotustoimisto and T-Media Oy, 2016).

Finnish citizens’ strong trust in an inclusive and equally representative society is rooted in Finland’s historical state- and nation-building process, in which civil society associations have played an important role. Associations have been a traditional form of claims-making through which interests are incorporated into the state. The linkage between associations and the state has been described as a ‘mutual interaction’ (Alapuro, 2005: 383).

In Finland, pro-asylum activism gained new ground and mobilised new people from 2016 onwards as a response to tightened asylum legislation and increased numbers of negative asylum decisions (Horsti and Pirkkalainen, 2021; Näre, 2020). In 2015, more than 32,000 asylum seekers, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan, arrived in Finland. This surge in the number of asylum seekers led to varied reactions in the Finnish civil society. A loose ‘Refugees Welcome’ movement emerged, made up of voluntary workers assisting with the reception of asylum seekers. Anti-migration groups mobilised in opposition to both asylum seekers and Finnish pro-migrant volunteers. Simultaneously, the wider political context also transformed. After the parliamentary elections of 2015, the nationalist Finns Party, the Centre Party and the National Coalition Party formed a government that began implementing a more restrictive immigration policy. Changes in the Aliens Act led to limited access to legal assistance in the asylum process and restrictions concerning the grounds for international protection. Moreover, beginning in 2015, the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) tightened its asylum policies and procedures

(Saarikkomäki et al., 2018). Various restrictions in law, policies and asylum processes eventually led to an increase in negative asylum decisions and removal decisions (Finnish Immigration Service, 2020).

Although there had been pro-asylum seeker NGOs and networks functioning in Finland long before 2015, the changing political context mobilised new people and groups to political pro-asylum activism (Horsti and Pirkkalainen, 2021; Pirkkalainen, 2021). By political activism, we refer to contentious forms of activity that aim to challenge and resist the authorities and state policies, as opposed to activities that are collaborative with state authorities. Since autumn 2016, several marches for the rights of asylum seekers were organised in various Finnish cities. In February 2017, Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers whose asylum applications had been rejected started a sit-in protest in the centre of Helsinki with the help of Finnish pro-asylum activists (Näre and Jokela, 2022; Pirkkalainen, 2021). In addition to the more visible pro-asylum activism that took place in Helsinki, smaller towns and cities around Finland experienced a spurt in pro-asylum activism, which in many places has continued to the present day.

In Europe, from country to country, the ‘politicisation’ of voluntary and solidarity actions on behalf of asylum seekers has taken different courses and occurred to varying extents since 2015 (Della Porta, 2018; Schwiertz and Schwenken, 2020). This is partly because different countries have various traditions of political activism (Rosenberger, 2018). In the Finnish context, which is characterised by high trust in institutions, consensus-oriented political culture, and modest protest culture (Alapuro, 2005; Luhtakallio, 2012; Siisiäinen, 1992), the questions of how and why citizens lose trust in institutions and of how distrust affects individuals and their civic activism offer interesting new insight into how trust and distrust play out in political activism.

A processual view of institutional distrust

There is no uniformly accepted definition of trust in sociology, partly because trust is an abstract, intangible yet attractive concept (Möllering, 2006: 1). Trust has been used as ‘a holding word for a variety of phenomena’ (Levi, 1998: 78). Trust has been defined as rational calculation (e.g. Elster, 1989; Hardin, 1996) and as an affective, emotional stance (e.g. Davidson, 2016; Jasper, 1998; Lyytinen, 2017). Although it is important to recognise the different perspectives on trust, there seems to be a consensus that trust is never an automatic by-product of social arrangements but needs to be actively produced and maintained (e.g. Misztal, 1996; Seligman, 1997). According to Möllering (2006: 10–1), trust undergoes gradual growth, loss, or transformation in a process of reflexive familiarisation and structuration.

We draw on Möllering’s (2006: 11) approach that understands trust as a relational orientation including reason, routine, and reflexivity, and that ‘all three elements are needed, but neither can explain trust alone’. Previously, Möllering’s framework on trust has been used, for example, in research on refugee–host relations (Kyriakides et al., 2019). In this article, we analyse how pro-asylum activists evaluate institutions, which we understand as objects of trust. In line with Möllering, we understand trust as a relation between a ‘trustor’ and a ‘trustee’, being processual, constantly made, and remade in interaction. Moreover, trust also requires a ‘leap of faith’, which can be enabled by

suspension (Möllering, 2006: 11; Möllering, 2001). People have agency to either use or not to use ‘leap of faith’ ‘for the sake of reaching trust’ (Möllering, 2006: 125). Genuine trust has consequences, it impacts interests, and includes both ‘moral and emotional elements’ (Möllering, 2006: 5). Trust should thus be perceived as a combination of both rationality and emotions. Importantly, trust is understood as a judgement that inspires action (Levi and Stoker, 2000: 476). As the question of trust is informed by a great deal of historical sociology from Durkheim and Simmel onwards (Misztal, 1996), providing a full overview is not possible within the limits of this article. Instead, we focus on institutional trust as a case of generalised trust.

Generalised trust has been widely studied and there is a large amount of empirical research on the causes and effects of generalised trust, who in the society trusts and who does not trust other people (e.g. Coleman, 1990; Sztompka, 1999; Warren, 1999). It has also been argued that generalised trust in the society depends on how political and administrative institutions function (Rothstein, 2005).

Institutional trust, which typically refers to people’s trust in formal and informal institutions (e.g. Möllering, 2006), is often researched at the level of institutions, without explicit focus on actors who trust and are trusted (Misztal, 1996). Luhmann (1979), for example, points out that trust in institutions is building up through repeated experiences with the system, and that it persists because it rests on generalisation and is impersonal and diffuse. Trust norms and values have an impact on the degree to which people trust different institutions (Braithwaite, 1998). Welter and Nadezhda (2012: 51) maintain that institutional trust also reflects the functionality of institutions and distrust can be associated with a deficient institutional framework. In the social movement literature, citizens’ distrust in formal political institutions is argued to transform into ‘critical trust’ that can alter formal institutions (Della Porta, 2012; Norris, 2011). This line of thinking emphasises the need for change in institutions so that they can adapt to more critical citizens (Rosanvallon, 2008).

In this article, we align ourselves to strands of research that recognise the role of actors in institutional trust. Giddens (1990: 83–88) has described how actors can have trust in abstract systems such as institutions via ‘access points’, through which the actor interacts with representatives of the system and thus experiences the system. Giddens (1990: 88) defines access points as ‘points of connection between lay individuals or collectivities and the representatives of abstract system’.

By focusing on institutional access points as crucial ‘places of vulnerability for abstract systems [and] junctions at which trust can be maintained or built up’ (Giddens, 1990: 88), we argue that institutional distrust is a reflexive process (Möllering, 2006: 75). Actors evaluate institutional practices and experiences of distrust can lead to action. We propose that distrust can result in *corrective practices* through which the actors seek to impact institutional practices. We also draw on the idea that ‘trust is seldom unconditional’, meaning that institutions in a specific domain can be trusted whereas in other domains not (Levi and Stoker, 2000: 476; Lewicki et al., 1998).

Data and methods

The data used in this analysis were collected in three different, yet similar, research projects carried out individually by the authors. The projects shared the similar interest in

conducting research on pro-asylum activism. Two of the projects focused on activists living mostly in the capital region and being active in the larger activist networks, whereas the third project included two activist networks in Turku and other individuals working as volunteers in three small towns. Two of the projects engaged in what can be called an action-oriented research approach enabling the researchers to engage in various activist endeavours. Only one of the projects explicitly focused on the question of trust already from the design of the project and questions related to social and institutional trust were asked as part of the interviews. In the other two projects, social and institutional trust emerged as key issues which interviewees talked about, even if the initial research questions did not explicitly include trust.

The interviews selected for this study were conducted with a total of 38 activists, all of whom were Finnish citizens, had secondary or tertiary education (most had the university degree) and were of middle-class background (even if some had precarious labour market positions as freelancers). Interviews with individuals of other nationalities were omitted from this analysis to focus specifically on Finnish citizens' sense of institutional trust. This was important as institutional trust is known to vary between countries, cultures and contexts (Lyon et al., 2012), and activists with migrant or other than Finnish ethnic backgrounds may have rather different experiences compared to Finnish activists, given the predominance of institutional distrust among ethnic minorities and asylum seekers (see e.g. Hynes, 2009). Most of the interviewees were ethnic Finnish, with only three ethnic non-Finnish who had a migration history. Most of the interviews were individual, semi-structured thematic interviews. One informant was interviewed twice, and six activists took part in group-based peer interviews.

Some of the activists were retired, but the majority were still working. The group of activists comprised eight men and 30 women, a gender ratio common in migrant-related activism (Braun, 2017). The activists lived in the Metropolitan region, Jyväskylä, Turku and smaller towns in south-west Finland.

Like Gill et al. (2014), we emphasise the importance of including diverse forms of activism. Among our interviewees, there are activists who act on their own or with small informal networks of people not associated with any larger network or organisation. Some interviewees engage with activist groups, yet none of these groups were motivated around political or religious ideologies. The local and national networks included the Every Women's Centre for undocumented women, the 'We See You' activist group, the 'Right to Live' protest network and the 'Stop Deportations' network. These groups are loosely governed and consist of people of different socio-economic, political, religious, migration and gender backgrounds. Often interviewees had joined these wider networks after they had judged asylum institutions as distrustful, so their entry point to activism was in the phase of corrective practices. In this article, our focus is on the individual activists rather than the activist groups.

All interviews were conducted between February 2018 and February 2020. Most of the interviewees had started voluntary work with asylum seekers in 2015 and at that time had hardly any or no prior experience in pro-asylum activism. At the time of the interviews, most of the interviewees had been engaging in activism from 3 to 5 years, which enabled reflections of their institutional trust and distrust from a retrospective perspective.

The interviewees were recruited through various strategies: some were already known to us, others we happened to meet at various research- or activism-related events and a few were contacted via snowballing. The interviews were conducted in our offices, activists' homes and workplaces, churches, and cafés. As the interviewees were all Finnish citizens, the language of the interviews was Finnish. Interviews lasted between 60 and 180 minutes and were audio-recorded. The recordings were fully or partly transcribed to produce a written record of those portions of the interviews that referred explicitly or implicitly to the issue of institutional trust. The transcripts were analysed with qualitative content analysis to examine the different dimensions of a reflexive process of institutional trust: trust judgements of institutional practices and practices that followed, alongside the emotions and consequences. Trust judgements, practices, emotions and consequences were coded as themes and the analysis focused on these themes from the point of view of interviewees' subjective meanings, experiences and narratives, in the specific context: pro-asylum activism in Finland after 2015.

Research ethics are paramount not only in refugee and deportation scholarship but also in the study of activism. Although our analysis is based on three research projects with slightly different approaches, building trust between us and the activists was a key issue in each of them, and rapport remained positive throughout the research process. Some of us have also participated in activism and become part of the activist networks, and thus, we see our position as researcher-activists. In our interviews, we have carefully followed ethical guidelines and gained informed consent from participants. As some activist networks are rather small and an anti-immigration political climate prevails, we have ensured the anonymity of our participants using pseudonyms, some of which the participants have chosen themselves. Details of the activists' backgrounds and the specific networks they were part of have also been omitted to protect participant anonymity.

Evaluating institutional practices in the field of asylum policies

While undertaking voluntary work to support recently arrived asylum seekers in 2015, many interviewees got to know asylum seekers personally. They followed closely their acquaintances' asylum processes and from 2016 on started noticing mistakes and unfairness in the processing of applications when asylum seekers gave them their confidential asylum decisions to read.

Reading decisions on asylum cases functioned as important 'access points' (Giddens, 1990: 88); not as a direct interaction with authorities but as an instance enabling evaluations of institutional practices. As interviewees read the negative decisions and shared their experiences with other activists, they found evidence of problems in the asylum process and made trust judgements (Levi and Stoker, 2000) about the Immigration Service of Finland (Migri).

Mikko listed several problems witnessed in his encounters with Migri, including poor-quality asylum decisions; cases handled by newly hired, inexperienced staff; the refusal of the right to record asylum interviews; lack of access to recordings made by officials or the poor quality of official recordings; inexperienced or unprofessional

interpreters; and lack of access to legal assistance. Such experiences led interviewees to judge Migri and its processes as distrustful.

Through reading asylum decisions interviewees started noticing wider, structural issues behind them. They realised through evaluations of institutional practices by Migri the implications of restrictions in asylum policies and law implemented in 2016 (Näre, 2020). These restrictions were evaluated with an emotional load of anger and disbelief. Saara recalled the anger she felt about the restrictions:

During the parliamentary elections [in 2015], when there were changes in the law [the Aliens Act], all kinds of restrictions were aimed at the most vulnerable people. This made us angry. I was like, hell no, you just cannot do this, this is impossible.

Particularly since 2016, when asylum seekers began receiving decisions on removal from the country, activists started interacting directly with the police, especially the immigration police. Accompanying asylum seekers to the police station, for example, functioned as a direct 'access point' to the institution (Giddens, 1990: 88) and allowed activists to interact with the police responsible for the detention and deportation of rejected asylum seekers. In these direct interactions, interviewees made trust judgements about the police. Interviewees stated that it was disappointing to witness the police's racism towards asylum seekers. Laura related that when accompanying an asylum seeker to the police station to file a new asylum application, she heard a police officer call an asylum seeker 'the dregs'. The police officers were perceived as working in a secretive, non-transparent manner, especially during deportations. Interviewees witnessed lies and deception, as Hawra described: 'Yes, the authorities have fooled asylum seekers to come somewhere under false pretences and then took [deported] them – also the police. So in that sense I do not trust them'. These experiences were described as so alarming to the interviewees that they ended up judging the police as distrustful.

Interviewees had also observed several court cases of asylum appeals. By reading the files by some of the lawyers and legal assistants, as well as the Court decisions interviewees started making trust judgements about the legal system in asylum appeals. Anna reported seeing lawyers doing 'really bad copy-paste appeals that are one page long and do not make any sense', seeing legal assistants make appeals without meeting the asylum seeker and not answering the phone or disappearing in the middle of the process. She explained that this behaviour led to asylum applications and appeals in which the applicant's essential vulnerabilities, such as a history as a survivor of torture or human trafficking, were not recognised in the asylum process.

Interviewees also observed that the administrative courts often simply repeated Migri's own justifications for their negative decisions. Anna explained that it was common for the decisions of administrative court judges to acknowledge the poor quality of legal assistance given asylum seekers while none the less upholding the negative decision. After following several court cases and noticing how rarely leave to appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court was granted to asylum seekers, many interviewees evaluated the legal system in asylum appeals as distrustful. Some had even started questioning whether Finland is still the rights-based constitutional state. Often their distrust related to the suspicion that Finland was not respecting the principle of non-refoulement.

The interviewees described emotions of fear, worry, helplessness, anger, and rage when making evaluations of asylum institutions. In Finland, citizens have traditionally trusted an inclusive and representative state that both cares for the interests of its citizens and protects vulnerable people, such as asylum seekers. This general strong trust can be seen as citizens' ability to use 'leaps of faith' that are needed for trust in abstract systems in addition to reason, routine and reflexivity (Möllering, 2006). The interviewees, after emotional experiences and evaluations of the institutions as distrustful, can no longer 'use leap of faith' for reaching trust towards the Finnish state authorities. They had to reinterpret their image of the state which had previously been based on a belief that Finland is a country of human rights and equality. These instances of trust judgements with strong emotions can also be seen as 'moral shocks' (Jasper, 1998: 409), which are unexpected events that prompt a sense of outrage and mobilise people for political action.

Corrective practices and consequences of distrust

We distinguish the activists' access points to institutions and the trust judgements on institutional practices they made as the first phase of activism and the corrective practices they began to engage in to remedy the mistakes of authorities as the second phase of activism. As concrete corrective practices, interviewees started filing complaints and writing statements to compensate for the poor work done by some lawyers. They helped asylum seekers to write appeals or make new asylum applications and helped people under the threat of deportation by lodging appeals based on non-refoulement. They accompanied asylum seekers to asylum hearings. In this way, activists ended up doing significant work to assist in the asylum and asylum appeal processes by trying to safeguard the fair and equal treatment of people.

Through these corrective practices many interviewees who began working with asylum seekers on a humanitarian basis eventually shifted their actions towards political activism. Contrary to previous studies on pro-asylum seeker activism in which humanitarian activities, political activism and civil disobedience are considered distinct forms of activism (Kleres, 2018; Milan, 2018; Toubøl, 2018), we argue that these different kinds of activities can be understood as overlapping phases of activism. According to Rosenberger (2018: 12), experienced activists typically have wider political aims and organise broader political protests, whereas 'ordinary citizens' who become involved in activism are often acquaintances or friends of an asylum seeker, trying to stop a specific deportation from taking place. Rather than confirming this division, our data demonstrate how 'ordinary citizens' became 'experienced activists' precisely because of the process of losing their institutional trust and engaging in corrective practices. As Niina described,

It started [in 2015] with voluntary work, when we would gather clothes for asylum seekers and organise activities such as language courses for them. At first, we had the thought that when asylum seekers faced problems in their cases, we would direct them to the authorities, to the lawyers, and they would deal with them in the right way. Then we started noticing that this was not the case, that there are a horrible number of mistakes in asylum decisions. After seeing that, I started political activism.

Through corrective practices activists engaged more in-depth with the institutions and were able to make further trust judgements and gather information about specific representatives of institutions. Hawra noticed that when she accompanied asylum seekers to meet with authorities, how they were treated ‘completely depends on who is sitting there behind the window or on the other side of the table’. She, like several others, felt the need to accompany asylum seekers because she did not trust that the authorities would treat them in a just and equal manner. By accompanying asylum seekers, Hawra anticipated that her presence as a white, Finnish citizen would guarantee better treatment during the institutional encounters. Activists distrusted particular institutions in relation to how asylum seekers would be treated while at the same time trusting that as Finnish citizens, they themselves would be treated fairly. As argued by Levi and Stoker (2000) and Lewicki et al. (1998), trust and distrust are not unconditional but trust and distrust can coexist.

From the activists’ point of view, the refugee reception crisis that began in 2015 gradually led to volunteers taking care of issues that should have been the state’s responsibility. Losing trust in authorities made many activists think and feel that they are obliged to engage in corrective practices, because otherwise asylum seekers would not be treated in a fair and equal way. Vuokko explained that she would ‘rather go pick berries than read Migri documents and solve issues in them’, but she felt she must continue ‘because people are in trouble, I have to help them’. Overall, this sense of injustice and being obliged to take action resulted in activists further evaluating institutions, making these institutions the target of their discontent, as also observed by Abdou and Rosenberger (2019: 113).

Interviewees described their corrective practices, especially with detention and deportation cases, as unending ‘crisis work’ that encroached upon their free time because so many people needed help. Many struggled to take holidays or even days off: ‘My whole life is taken up by this, as I have to help people, and I do the work of lawyers, psychologists and social workers for free’, Laura said. Indeed, due to the time-consuming nature of their activism and the potential for ideological differences, many had gradually distanced themselves from old friends while others experienced tensions with family members and relatives.

Laura’s experience resonates with research on the role of third-sector organisations in supporting asylum seekers in countries, such as the United Kingdom, where asylum seekers are not allowed to work and in which the financial support is so low that it pushes individuals into poverty (Mayblin and James, 2019). Similarly in Finland, third-sector organisations offer services to asylum seekers and undocumented residents, but they lack resources and are dependent on temporary project funds. Hence, individual activists feel morally compelled to take over various tasks that would commonly be the responsibility of the third sector.

The corrective practices were not only time-consuming but also economically taxing. Interviewees reported spending significant amounts of money in assisting people, buying plane tickets, for instance, to escape or return to Finland, or covering medical bills. Particularly for those activists who were working as freelancers or living on savings, activism could even lead to personal bankruptcy. Mari told us she was on the verge of burnout due to the combination of her huge workload related to detention and asylum cases and her lack of income. Activism was taking so much of her time that she did not

have time for her freelance work. Moreover, due to a small grant she had received, she was not entitled to unemployment benefits. Mari explained:

I do not even have a passport, because I cannot afford it. I have taken the attitude of being in the position of a refugee because I do not even have a passport. It is really difficult financially right now.

Other activists spoke also about burnout and experiences of mental and physical stress, which is common in vicarious victims. Burnout is of course not unique in the Finnish case, as many pro-asylum seeker activists in other countries are reported suffering from it due to the huge workload, responsibility and diminishing number of activists engaging in it (see, for example, Oikonomakis, 2018). In the Finnish case, however, it was not only the amount of demanding work but also the emotional toll of fading away of faith and trust in the Finnish constitutional country respecting human rights that contributed significantly to anxiety. Vuokko explained that on some evenings, she could only 'cry on the corner of my couch, I feel so anxious'. Thus, the individual impacts of institutional distrust also affect activists' ability and motivation to continue activism.

Activists who worked in an organised network emphasised the benefits of strong peer support and, when possible, professional counselling. Affective ties with fellow activists helped to relieve these symptoms and sustain activism. Given the circumstances described, it is unsurprising that many activists had to make a conscious decision to limit their involvement in corrective practices especially in demanding detention and deportation cases in order to protect their well-being and personal lives. When activists evaluated that institutions would not quickly fix the problems in asylum cases and that the heavy workload would continue, they adopted a more professional orientation to their activism. This included taking time off. Anna explained the change in practice as follows: 'this is not a sprint but a marathon, because the overall situation will not change quickly. So if you want to continue [activism], you need to take breaks. Like those who work in crisis settings'.

The activists' evaluations of the institutions in the field of asylum policies as distrustful made them target institutions with their demands. Interviewees engaged in political lobbying. They contacted individual politicians but were also active on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. On social media, they challenged institutional actors such as Migri, the police and the Ministry of the Interior by demanding responses to the problems they had encountered in specific asylum, detention and deportation cases. By making public their firsthand information, activists sought to offer an alternative to the mainstream media, which they felt was rather silent on the wrongdoings. Political lobbying can also be seen as corrective practice as interviewees explained that they engage in activism not only because they want to help people in marginalised and vulnerable situations, but also because they want to correct the course Finland has taken: 'I keep thinking that I'm doing patriotic work here, when I'm defending the human rights of refugees', Saara said. Laura shared a similar view, arguing: 'I have a bigger political battle going on about what kind of society we want'. Despite their distrust in the asylum authorities, Laura and Saara, like many other activists, developed a critical trust (Della Porta, 2012; Norris, 2011) towards the political system in Finland in continuing to trust that their activism would lead to change at some point.

For others, losing trust created a sense of helplessness. After going through several Migri decisions, making appeals and following court processes, interviewees noticed structural racism that made them feel they were ‘facing a wall’, as Paula described the feeling of not being listened to by authorities. ‘This country failed and broke us’, Paula added. Salla described feeling helpless because ‘the overall picture is so blurry’. Losing faith in ‘the system’ made Salla feel that she was ‘living in the wheels of a machine [. . .] I cannot do anything. I am just watching in slow motion’. Milla experienced not only disappointment but also shame: ‘I am ashamed of being a Finn’. When interviewees could not ‘use leap of faith’ (Möllering, 2006) towards the Finnish state, they described deeply emotional consequences. Teresa described the traumatic effects of institutional distrust:

I am scared and worried about what will happen to people when they are shoved onto the aeroplanes [deported]. On top of that, I feel disappointed that I have lived my whole life in a constitutional state and believed that people are treated well here. This disappointment has been deep for many and has caused trauma.

However, many interviewees, despite their distrust in the field of asylum policies and even sense of helplessness, disappointment and changing affective relation to the Finnish state did not delegitimise the state in general (see also Passy and Monsch, 2020: 191). Interviewees engaged in traditional ways of protesting by obeying the law and avoiding direct conflicts. Despite this moderate way of political activism and demands that asylum laws and policies should be corrected to the level they were before 2015, their claims were largely unheard by authorities and politicians.

Conclusion

Research on activism has commonly taken for granted that activists, especially in the field of human rights, tend to trust institutions less compared to the general population. The effects of the erosion of trust can easily be romanticised if distrust is only perceived as a catalyst for civic and political activism. In this article, we have examined the process of distrust by focusing on evaluations of institutional practices at institutional access points and trust judgements as well as corrective practices as the consequences of distrusting. We have analysed interviewees’ subjective meanings, experiences and narratives of institutional distrust in the grassroots level in a particular policy field in Finland, a country that scores high in international comparisons on institutional trust. We have shown contextual specificities in institutional trust/distrust when analysing a process of how distrust evolves after encounters between citizens and authorities.

We have demonstrated that distrust in institutions enhances activists’ attempts to take over the functions of those institutions, in other words engage in corrective practices by acting as layman lawyers and social workers in addition to political advocates. As activists began to conduct the work they felt the state of Finland should have been carrying out, they began to feel that their voluntary work had transformed into an obligation, reinforcing their discontent with the asylum-related institutions. Our findings are especially alarming in the context of Finland, which has traditionally been considered ‘a trust-based society’.

Evaluating institutional practices as distrustful and taking over the work of institutions in the form of corrective practices imposed dramatic emotional and financial costs on the lives of individual activists. The activists' emotions of distrust were related to negative feelings such as fear, worry and anger. Activists also felt helplessness and exhaustion. Many were ashamed of the Finnish state and of being a Finn. Emotionally, distrust relates to deep disappointment when noting that the 'myth' of Finland being equal and inclusive is not true. Despite, or perhaps also because of, the negative valence of these emotions related to distrust, some activists gained new strength and motivation to continue to work against asylum-related injustices. This indicates that the activists continued to trust the democratic system in Finland and its capability to absorb their claims in the long run.

As the vast literature on the role of migrant and asylum activism has argued, most migrant support groups seek to improve the conditions of migrants and asylum seekers by negotiating and dealing with the nation-state in its own terms and logic (Gill et al., 2014). Activism that stays within the logic of the system, in practice can lead to discourses of asylum seekers as productive and good members of the society (e.g. Bagelman, 2016; Bauder, 2017; Darling and Squire, 2012; Lyytinen, 2022) creating individual hierarchies of deservingness and excluding those who are not worthy. Moreover, presenting asylum seekers as 'good' and arguing for their 'deservingness' risks placing them in a depoliticised position of indebtedness. Also, in the Finnish case, activists were operating within the logic of the nation-state but their activities took place in collaboration with asylum seekers' own political mobilisation (Näre and Jokela, 2022; Pirkkalainen, 2021). As research on refugees' political mobilisation has demonstrated, also asylum seekers' political claims remain within the logic of the nation-state (e.g. McNevin, 2013; Näre, 2020; Tyler, 2006) also for pragmatic and strategic reasons.

Our findings highlight the critical intersection between institutional distrust and the sustainable continuation of activism. In general, the social movement literature argues that activists tend to place new demands on existing institutions, and if institutions are responsive to the demands of the activists, change may occur. We demonstrate, however, that in the case of pro-asylum activism in a time of growing right-wing populism and anti-immigration tendencies, activists' demands, though far from radical, are largely unheard and dismissed by the institutions. In several European countries, the situation is even more dire as the state response to humanitarian actions by civil society has been to criminalise the act of helping migrants. Activists have been charged and prosecuted for helping asylum seekers, refugees and migrants (Fekete et al., 2019). These so-called crimes of solidarity demonstrate how in recent years the field of pro-asylum and pro-migrant mobilisation has become a highly contested issue and activism is perceived as a threat by state authorities. More comparative empirical research on processes of institutional distrust and pro-asylum activism would be important in order to fully understand consequences of institutional distrust to citizens' relations and commitments to the democratic systems in different countries.

Because of the rise of populism and anti-democratic authoritarianism across Europe, it is even more vital to emphasise dialogue and trust between public institutions and activists, rather than confrontation to battle the increasing polarisation. In this regard, two practical implications and recommendations emerge from our analysis.

First, institutions should engage in dialogue with activists and be more responsive to their criticism. Second, trust should be taken as a specific development target in public institutions; here, encounters with service-users are key. In Sweden, for example, the government has set up a committee for developing trust-based public institutions. Same could be done in Finland in order to enhance what is left of the trust-based Finnish society.

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Résumé

Alors qu'il existe de nombreuses recherches sur la façon dont la confiance et la méfiance à l'égard des institutions se manifestent dans les formes que prend la participation politique, les recherches existantes manquent d'analyses approfondies sur ce en quoi consiste réellement la confiance et la méfiance, c'est-à-dire comment les individus évaluent les institutions comme étant dignes de confiance ou non et quelles sont les conséquences de cette évaluation pour les individus et leur relation à l'État de façon plus générale. À partir d'une recherche qualitative portant sur des citoyens finlandais engagés dans l'activisme pro-asile, nous examinons comment la méfiance à l'égard des institutions évolue comme un processus réflexif. En analysant les jugements de confiance des citoyens sur les pratiques institutionnelles et les actions qui en découlent, nous soutenons que la méfiance à l'égard des institutions renforce les tentatives des activistes de s'engager dans des pratiques correctives, c'est-à-dire de prendre en charge les fonctions des institutions lorsqu'ils relèvent des erreurs ou des injustices dans les pratiques institutionnelles. Les pratiques correctives renforcent la méfiance des activistes à l'égard des institutions liées à l'asile et les amènent à remettre en question le « mythe » d'une Finlande égalitaire et inclusive. S'engager dans des pratiques correctives a un coût émotionnel et économique. Malgré les conséquences négatives de la méfiance à l'égard des institutions, les activistes poursuivent leur travail, ce qui indique qu'ils continuent à faire confiance au système démocratique finlandais et à sa capacité à intégrer leurs revendications à long terme. La méfiance à l'égard des institutions et la confiance généralisée peuvent donc coexister.

Mots-clés

activisme, demandeurs d'asile, institutions, méfiance à l'égard des institutions, processus

Resumen

Si bien existe un amplio volumen de investigación sobre cómo la confianza y la desconfianza institucional se manifiestan en las formas que toma la participación política, la investigación existente carece de un análisis exhaustivo sobre en qué consiste realmente la confianza y la desconfianza, es decir, cómo los individuos evalúan las instituciones como confiables o no y qué consecuencias tiene esta evaluación para los individuos y su relación con el Estado de manera más amplia. A partir de una investigación cualitativa sobre ciudadanos finlandeses que están implicados en el activismo a favor del asilo, se examina cómo evoluciona la desconfianza institucional como proceso reflexivo. Al analizar las evaluaciones de confianza que hacen los ciudadanos sobre las prácticas institucionales y las acciones que se derivan de ellas, se argumenta que la desconfianza en las instituciones refuerza las intenciones de los activistas de implicarse en prácticas

correctivas, en otras palabras, de asumir las funciones de las instituciones cuando notan que se producen errores o injusticia en las prácticas institucionales. Las prácticas correctivas refuerzan la desconfianza de los activistas en las instituciones relacionadas con el asilo y les hacen cuestionar el 'mito' de Finlandia como un país igualitario e inclusivo. Involucrarse en prácticas correctivas es emocional y económicamente costoso. A pesar de las consecuencias negativas de la desconfianza institucional, los activistas continúan su trabajo señalando que continúan confiando en el sistema democrático finlandés y en su capacidad para atender a sus demandas en el largo plazo. Por tanto, la desconfianza institucional y la confianza generalizada pueden coexistir.

Palabras clave

activismo, desconfianza institucional, instituciones, proceso, solicitantes de asilo