

# Giddens' View of Trust and Its Revelation in Sight of Knowledge

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the mechanism of "trust" in Giddens' horizon. There have been many perspectives of attention and research about the causes and mechanisms of trust, such as moral quality, values and institutional culture. Giddens, as the famous English socialist, used "knowledge" as an analytical tool to generalize and refine the existing research, basing on the special social relationship of "expert-layman". He put forward two hypotheses about the establishment of trust. One was the possibility of trust coming into being by the asymmetry of knowledge; the other was the necessity of trust shaping by the certainty of knowledge. In modern society, these two factors are difficult to reverse, but can be rationally used. According to Giddens' logic, the various phenomenon of the instability of trust in China now can be attributed to the weakness of both the two conditions. Because China has entered the information age, and knowledge has been expanding rapidly. In order to solve these problems, basing on the "knowledge" angle, it is important to keep a rational view of the phenomenon of instability of trust from the vertical dimension, and create a relatively stable subjective and objective environment from the horizontal dimension, avoiding two extremes of trust: blind trust and skepticism.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, Giddens, View of Trust

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## 1. Introduction

The reduction of "trust" is a kind of perceptual experience of modern people, and a universal problem for most of countries after modernizing. Theorists have formed various viewpoints on the causes and mechanisms of "trust". Some scholars, from the ethical point of view, point out that the transmission of trust depends on the moral character of individuals and their ethical trust in organizations and systems [1]. Some, from the perspective of the political culture, consider that the main reasons of the political distrust are as follows: the system design idea based on the hypothesis of kind human nature, the values system of pluralism and chaos, the missing shame-based culture, etc. [2]. Some, basing on institutional perspective, advocate that trust in modern stranger society is maintained by formal systems such as laws and regulations, rules and regulations. [3] Other scholars have analyzed it from the perspective of social mobility. Individuals in an autocratic culture are less likely to trust others when they

move to other countries [4], and downward social mobility can also lead to a high degree of mistrust [5]. Regardless of the angle of view, these studies believe that the generation of "trust" must rely on a certain intermediary: moral quality, values or institutional culture. Anthony Giddens (1938-), a famous British sociologist, further abstracted these intermediaries into one thing – knowledge. He constructed a trust system from the perspective of knowledge.

## 2. Theoretical Assumption: Two Conditions for Generating Trust

Experts and laymen are Giddens' two subjects of "trust". From Giddens' perspective, "expert" refers to a person who has a specific type of technology or knowledge that ordinary people do not possess, including pastors, wizards, scientists, philosophers, etc. otherwise is "layman". Giddens believes that the division of labor in modern society tends to be refined, resulting in many "experts" who are good at different

knowledge and skills. Therefore, the whole society can be divided into two groups: “experts” and “laymen”. “Experts” and “laymen” have become a special way of existence in many social relationships in modern society. Giddens' construction of “trust concept” is just based on “experts” and “laymen”.

### **2.1. Knowledge Asymmetry: The Possibility of Trust**

What is “trust”? Giddens defines that trust is the confidence that a person or a system can be dependent on. In a given set of consequences or events, this confidence expresses a belief in honesty or the love of others, or, the belief in the correctness of abstract principles (technical knowledge) [6]. And the object of “trust” contains two kinds of references: one is the specific individual, and the other is the principle of abstraction. Therefore, the “trust” of the layman to the expert can also be analyzed from two aspects: one is the trust of the expert's own character, and the other is the trust of the “knowledge” mastered by the expert (and then translated into the trust in the expert itself). Obviously, Giddens preferred the latter. “The trust we talk about in symbolic signs or expert systems is based on the correctness of the principles of trust (those individuals don't know), not on the trust above ‘moral quality’ (good motivation) for others.” [6] Logically, as long as laymen continue to trust this “knowledge”, the trust of experts will not fluctuate too much.

Giddens not only pointed out that the layman's trust in experts is based on the intermediary of “knowledge”, and also that “knowledge asymmetry” gives birth to this possibility of trust. The reason why experts can form an authority for the layman is that they have mastered the expertise or skills that many laymen do not know. This is an authoritative effect produced by “knowledge asymmetry.” Expert's knowledge of expertise and ignorance of knowledge by laymen have created a huge knowledge gap, and the asymmetry of this knowledge has created the need for “trust”. “The first condition for seeking trust is not lack of power but lack of complete information.” [6]. “Only when you are ignorant, whether you are ignorant of the knowledge claimed by the technologist or the ignorance of the thoughts and intentions of a close friend that a person depends on, there is a need for trust.” [6]. Therefore, in Giddens' view, the establishment of “trust” is based on the level of cognition, that is, because of “knowing” or “deep understanding”, the feeling of trust is caused. Meanwhile “ignorance” or “one-sided understanding” can also cause the need for trust which makes it possible to generate trust. Therefore, “In the case of confrontation between experts and ordinary people, what really matters is the imbalance of technology or information. This imbalance makes one person have authority over another.” [7] It can be said that obedience to this authority is not true obedience. “It tells us that authority is worthy of obedience by following our judgment.” [8]

### **2.2. Knowledge Certainty: The Necessity of Trust**

Based on the “possibility” condition of trust of knowledge asymmetry, Giddens further proposed the “necessity”

condition - the reliability of knowledge. “Although I have to trust their abilities, it is better to rely on them than to rely on the reliability of the expertise they use. This is something that I usually cannot verify in detail.” [6] Through trust and reliance on expertise, laymen can gain some sense of security based on these abstract and universal knowledge in the face of isolated incidents and disorganized external worlds, without generating excessive anxiety. Therefore, in order to maintain this trust, the reliability of knowledge is a necessary condition.

Therefore, further question is raised. As laymen, they do not fully understand and understand these professional knowledge. How do they judge the reliability of knowledge? Why do most people trust knowledge that they know little or nothing most of the time? Giddens believes that the education that individuals received from childhood has played a key role. Because children are not only instilled the connotation and use of knowledge itself in the process of formal education, but also accompanied by explicit education with a “hidden curriculum”, that is, fostering a social attitude to respect all technical knowledge. “Knowledge is regarded as indisputable in principle.” [6] As a result, “for a long time, science has maintained its image as a trustworthy knowledge that has fostered an attitude of respect for specialized technologies.” [6] It can be seen that in Giddens's concept, trust arises from a sensible ignorance, not a rational one. As long as the knowledge is not suspected, as long as the knowledge is considered to be reliable, the experts will be continuously respected and the authority of the experts is not easy to shake, which ultimately determines the recognition and trust of the experts' personality quality. Therefore, knowledge as an important medium for interaction between experts and laymen, the degree of truth and certainty determines the degree of trust. According to this logic, “knowledge reliability” is also a necessary condition for the emergence of “trust”.

## **3. Reality: The Weakening of the Two Conditions and Producing of Unstable Trust**

The logic of Giddens reveals that as long as there is a certain knowledge gap, as long as knowledge is considered to be certain and reliable, trust can maintain a certain degree of stability. This assumption can only be met in a society where the degree of modernization, that is, the degree of informatization is not high. However, the reality is that society is advancing and human beings are developing. Western developed countries are now entering the middle and late modernization period. Giddens found that the changes in various conditions of the real society, especially the rapid arrival of the information age, have threatened the traditional relatively stable trust mechanism, and the two conditions for generating trust have begun to weaken in different degrees in the real society.

### **3.1. The Weakening of Knowledge Asymmetry**

Giddens believes that knowledge is more and more open

with the explosion of knowledge and the diversification of knowledge dissemination channels, and the asymmetry of knowledge begins to weaken. The development of informatization has made individuals in modern society more and more become “actors who master a large amount of knowledge.” “Knowledge richness” is a generalization by Giddens' to character modern people. It shows that in addition to experts, laymen may also have more and more expertise with the explosive growth of knowledge and the popularity of education. As a result, knowledge asymmetry and the mystery of knowledge are weakened, which also reduces the trust of experts and the layman's trust in experts to a certain extent. Therefore, unlike the closed nature of knowledge in traditional societies, knowledge in modern society is more open. In principle, as long as ordinary people have certain intelligence and conditions, everyone can acquire and possess certain expertise and become an expert in some ways. Since the knowledge gap between experts and laymen in modern society is shrinking, then, according to the above logic, the possibility of trust will be weakened.

### **3.2. The Weakening of Knowledge Certainty**

Giddens also pointed out that in the middle and late modernization period, the uncertainty of knowledge is more obvious than that of the early stage, which is caused by at least two reasons.

On the one hand, the updating speed of the knowledge itself directly leads to an increase in uncertainty. In traditional society, the ruler strengthens the domination of the ruled by strictly controlling and monopolizing knowledge. Knowledge becomes mysterious and rarely updated; even if it is innovative, its process is extremely slow. But in modern society, “openness to innovation is a distinctive feature of expertise.” [9] Professional knowledge should be promoted in order to promote technological and social development. Therefore, some knowledge will soon become obsolete in modern society, and the existence of knowledge will become shorter and shorter. For the layman, because of the uncertainty of knowledge, it is difficult for the knowledge producer, experts themselves, to have a continuous sense of trust.

On the other hand, experts themselves will question and argue about knowledge. “The general accumulation of expert knowledge and expertise should be able to provide more and more certainty about the nature of the world. However, without the need to whitewash, this certainty condition is just doubt.” [9] “Reflective” is a thinking characteristic of modern people. Giddens believes that individuals in traditional society have no right to choose and can only comply with the external one-dimensional standard, because the society is ruled by a single authority. Therefore, “reflectiveness” does not have the conditions for generation. In modern society, especially in the middle and late modernization period, individual life begins to face multiple choices. The external criteria for identification have ceased to exist. Individuals have to turn to the heart in the process of choice, and thus the ability of “reflection” begins to take shape. The more pluralistic social life is, the more powerful this ability is. This means that for existing

knowledge, people are no longer blindly obsessed, but will continue to question in reflection, and correct old knowledge based on new knowledge, and the result of the correction produces newer knowledge. So reflection will weaken the certainty of knowledge. As a special group of modern society, experts themselves naturally have this kind of reflective feature, and they also question knowledge. This question is further converted to debate among experts. “This is not only because they may be cultivated in different schools of thought, but also because arguments and criticisms are the ‘engine’ of their cause.” [9] The criticism and debate of the experts themselves on knowledge further weakens the perception of the knowledge certainty of the layman, and thus weakens the trust and confidence to the experts.

“Negative trust results from refusing verification, either of contradictory information or because of a lazy attitude.” [10] Nowadays, with the development of modernization to the middle and late stage, the characteristics of “knowledge” have undergone significant changes in the perceptual cognition of modern people, influenced by the subjective and objective conditions of reflection, communication media and education. From regional, closed, fixed, certainty, to abstraction, openness, variability, uncertainty, the degree of authenticity and reliability of knowledge is decreasing, and the suspicion and criticism of ordinary people is further passed on to experts, making “trust” an important feature of instability in modern society. As the two theoretical conditions for generating “trust” are simultaneously weakened in the modernization process, the degree of trust of laymen in experts has been greatly reduced.

## **4. Some Enlightenment to China's Current Trust Problems**

China, as a transitional country, is now experiencing various kinds of impacts of modernity. It faces the test of various “trust instability” issues. Responding to such problems has become an important part of China's current cultural undertakings and spiritual civilization construction. Western countries gained early-earning advantages in researching this issue because they entered modernity earlier. Giddens, as an academic example in this field, his view provides a useful reference for China's trust building.

### **4.1. Vertical Dimension: Rational View of Instability of Trust**

To analyze the causes of the instability of trust, people usually focus on two perspectives. One is the subjective perspective, that is, in order to satisfy personal interests and needs, modern people ignore and abandon the basic virtues of honesty, which leads to the spread of suspicion and disbelief. If we analyze the reasons from this subjective dimension, then ideological and moral education is the basic solution. The other is the objective perspective, that is, the modern society lacks a reasonable and supporting institutional mechanism, and people have to make choices against the integrity under

different mechanisms. In this sense, the reconstruction of the trust mechanism is the way to resolve instability of trust, relying on the unity and convergence of various mechanisms.

These analyses have certain rationality. Giddens' analysis from the "knowledge" horizon opened another perspective for us. He formed two basic views from a non-cognitive perspective: First, knowledge asymmetry creates the possibility of trust; second, the certainty of knowledge constitutes the necessity of trust. The layman is easy to generate trust in the experts under his own lack of knowledge and the certainty about knowledge. Therefore, this kind of trust is transferred from knowledge to experts. However, the two conditions of modern society have undergone important changes. Not only is the phenomenon of knowledge asymmetry gradually weakened, but also the deterministic perception of knowledge by ordinary people is declining. Therefore, the sense of trust that is passed on to experts is also reduced.

Although the starting point of Giddens' analysis is Western society, it is also applicable to the transition period of China. China is experiencing the "pain" of the transition period that Western countries have experienced in the 17th and 18th centuries. According to Giddens's analysis, as long as any of the two conditions of constructing trust are weakened, it will lead to instability of trust. From the perspective of vertical dimension, with the development of China's information society, the asymmetry and certainty of knowledge will surely become a trend, which means that the problem of unstable trust will become a normal state for a long period of time in China. Therefore, Giddens explains the causes of the problem of trust in modern society from the perspective of knowledge, which helps to establish a more rational and objective attitude before seeking a solution to the problem of trust, instead of blindly condemn from morality.

#### **4.2. Horizontal Dimension: Positive Creating of Environment with Relatively Stable Trust**

According to Giddens's logic, although it is impossible to reconstruct complete trust in the short term, "trust" is an emotional basis for communication between people. From the horizontal dimension, some "relative" stability mechanisms should be found in "absolute" ones to create conditions for the consolidation of trust relationships as much as possible.

On the one hand, objectively, a good environment of trusting discourse can be created by constructing a correct and reasonable system of trust discourse, especially vigilant and avoid the ideological trap of trusting discourse. Whether to know the subjective world or the objective world, people often rely on existing knowledge. At present, people's cognition of the phenomenon of trust in modern society is largely due to the propaganda of the mainstream media or the spread of everyday discourse. However, it is seen that in the official or unofficial discourse system, the words "missing trust" appear very frequently, and people often unconsciously ask questions in such a way as "why trust is missing?" In fact, this discourse expression is not good enough; it has created a distrustful discourse environment. First, "missing trust" cannot be used

as a reasonable factual judgment on the current status of trust in China, and it is exaggerated, because China still has many mutual trusts in different fields. Second, the question "Why is trust missing?" presupposes a logical premise that there is no such phenomenon as lack of trust before. This is not true. Otherwise, traditional Chinese society would not appear the material tools such as "borrowing" or "receipt" which serve as collateral. Moreover, from the past "acquaintance society" to the modern "stranger society", the objective conditions have undergone tremendous changes, and the degree of trust in different eras of society is also not comparable. It can be seen that the discourse of "missing trust" has made a low evaluation of the objective reality, thus widening the distance between the past and the present, the reality and the ideal. It is easy for people to lose confidence in the party's ability to govern and the future development, extremely even completely reject the results of reform and opening up. So it is important to maintain vigilance against ideological traps in political discourse and its way of questioning. Accurate methods should be used as much as possible when exposing real problems. The word "trust instability" adopted by Giddens is worth learning. This expression not only reveals that various trust problems do exist in modern society, but also does not completely obliterate the possibility of trust and the possibility of enhancing trust, leaving enough confidence and space for people to solve the problem of trust. To some extent, creating a trusting discourse environment on a macro level is more important than constructing a concrete trust relationship on the micro level.

On the other hand, subjectively, the relative certainty of knowledge can be ensured by strengthening the mindset of "combination of criticism and defense", which can avoid the two extremes of trust. According to Giddens' logic, there are two ways to construct trust: one is to enhance the asymmetry of knowledge, and the other is to enhance the certainty of knowledge. Enhancing the asymmetry of knowledge means to block the knowledge of solidification, which obviously does not conform to the development trend of "openness" and "sharing" in modern society. Therefore, the only way is to enhance the certainty of knowledge. Of course, this certainty must also be "relative". Two extremes should be avoided. The first is to avoid blind trust. The premise of blind trust is accepting knowledge without any critic. The most outstanding performance in modern society is "follow the flow" and "follow the trend". It is easy to stock with all the money and readily believe a quack doctor, which infiltrated the psychology of blind trust. To avoid blind trust, keeping a "criticism" on knowledge is a way out. It is quite important to maintain a certain degree of questioning and critical spirit to the so-called "stock experts" and "health experts", and reasonably consume and rationally live. But some people have gone to the other extreme, taking a negative attitude of distrust of everything. So the second is to avoid skepticism. This phenomenon is exemplified by the "Tacitus effect", which means that when the government loses its credibility, it is considered to be a lie whether it is true or false. Some people have expressed concern that this extreme suspicion and

distrust of others and the society, especially the government, is likely to spread around and form a terrible “national character”. Therefore, spreading of skepticism should be controlled, and the inner defense thinking of the individual should be strengthened. In short, adhering to the attitude of combining criticism and defense can maintain the degree of “trust” in a reasonable range and maximize the stability of trust.

## 5. Conclusion

Giddens put forward some original ideas on the issue of “trust”, basing on the special social relationship of “expert-layman” and the “knowledge” analysis tool. He responded the reason for trust instability in the modern society from the “knowledge” dimension: the weakening of knowledge asymmetry and the weakening of knowledge certainty. In modern society, these two factors are difficult to reverse, but can be rationally used. In the rapidly changing information age, “relatively” certain knowledge still can be found to maintain the “trust” of this era.

Although Giddens' view of trust still has many merits, his thoughts on the background of “modernity” still have a lot of epoch, frontier and reference. China is in the process of modernization, and it is also encountering and facing many difficult “trust” issues. As an important aspect of socialist cultural construction with Chinese characteristics, it is extremely urgent to deal with these “trust” issues. And more local explorations are required with the analytical tool of “knowledge”.

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