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Why trust? A mixed-method investigation of the origins and meaning of trust during the COVID-19 lockdown in Denmark

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Abstract

Trust is highlighted as central to effective disease management. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Denmark seemed to embody this understanding. Characterizing the Danish response were high levels of public compliance with government regulations and restrictions coupled with high trust in the government and other members of society. In this article, we first revisit prior claims about the importance of trust in securing compliant citizen behaviour based on a weekly time-use survey that we conducted during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic (2 April–18 May 2020). Analysis of activity episodes, rather than merely self-reported compliance, both reconfirms the importance of institutional trust and nuances prior suggestions of detrimental effects of trust in other citizens. These survey-based results are further augmented through thematic analysis of 21 in-depth interviews with respondents sampled from the survey participants. The qualitative analysis reveals two themes, the first focusing on trust in others in Danish society and the second on the history of trust in Denmark. Both themes are based on narratives layered in cultural, institutional and inter-personal levels and further underline that institutional and social trust are complementary and not countervailing. We conclude by discussing how our analysis suggests pathways towards an increased social contract between governments, institutions and individuals that might be of use during future global emergencies and to the overall functioning of democracies.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, Denmark, identity, mixed-methods, trust

INTRODUCTION

Reciprocal trust is central to the relationship between citizens and the state and underscores the smooth functioning of institutions. Normally, trust lingers in the background, but in times of crisis, it can become a critical commodity and the subject of explicit reflection and debate. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of trust in citizens' capacity to sustain health-promoting behaviours was, allegedly, part of the UK's decision to delay social-distancing measures. In comparison, high trust among citizens of Nordic countries was used to explain the speed and public acceptability of anti-corona measures (e.g. 'Forsker: Danmarks verdensrekord i tillid hjælper os i kampen mod corona', ['Researcher: Denmark's world-record in trust helps us in the fight against corona'], Svendsen, 2020). Even Sweden's strategy of initially minimal restrictions was supposedly based on high levels of government trust in citizen responsibility. Trust remains an explanatory variable in discussions of management strategies (e.g. 'COVID lesson: trust the public with hard truths', Petersen, 2021) as well as debates over vaccine hesitancy.

In this article, we combine quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how and why trust mattered in the context of the initial closing, and subsequent reopening, of Danish society in Spring 2020. The role of trust in effective pandemic response is empirically supported (Blair et al., 2017; Han, et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2009; Rubin et al., 2009; van der Weerd et al., 2011). In the COVID-19 pandemic, countries with higher levels of political and interpersonal trust showed lower mortality rates (Bosancianu et al., 2020), and residents of European regions with higher levels of trust showed sharper drops in mobility after the pandemic outbreak (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). Individual data dovetails with this picture. Surveys conducted in Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Italy, the UK and the USA during the first two waves of the pandemic (March–November 2020) identify trust as a consistent independent predictor of support for government COVID responses (Jørgensen et al., 2021) and especially trust in scientists and national health authorities as strong predictors of vaccine acceptance (Lindholt et al., 2021). Data from other research teams converge with this picture (e.g. Bicchieri et al., 2021). But some studies also suggest variation in the effects of trust depending on exactly who is being trusted, and how strongly, may also play a crucial role for public health compliance behaviours (e.g. handwashing, social distancing): whereas trust in scientists and government seem to be associated with better compliance, trust in fellow citizens is often *negatively* linked to these outcomes, perhaps because those who trust others to behave responsibly feel less need for caution themselves (e.g. Olsen & Hjorth, 2020; Pagliaro et al., 2021; Woelfert & Kunst, 2020).

These previous, mostly quantitative results are important for demonstrating the significance of trust for understanding COVID-19 pandemic responses across different regional and national contexts and have undoubtedly informed the development of meaningful policies to curb the spread of disease, saving lives and improving well-being. But previous work also relies heavily on global self-reports of compliant behaviour that are prone to social desirability bias. Patterns observed in quantitative data also raise new questions. Especially, the somewhat counterintuitive result that higher generalized trust may reduce compliance with public health advice merits further investigation and elaboration.

Here we draw on a unique mixed-methods approach to shed new light on these issues. Our study, conducted in Denmark during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined a standardized, quantitative weekly time-use survey with a qualitative study to examine the relations between types of trust and public health compliance behaviours.

Our quantitative data provide a detailed characterization of a random selection of *activity episodes* on the day before the interview. We thus record compliant and less compliant behaviours (e.g. whether respondents socialized or engaged in other behaviours together with non-household contacts) in a more objective and matter-of-fact way that should be less susceptible to socially desirable response behaviour than global self-reports of compliance with recommended behaviour. In-depth interviews with a subset of respondents, strategically selected to represent the full spectrum of responses to standardized trust questions in the quantitative survey, allow us to deeply examine key issues and questions highlighted by previous research. We explore how trust is experienced, why it mattered in the pandemic, and where it comes from in the first place. Eventually, our mixed-methods approach allows us to re-assess, extend and

nuance previous research on the role of trust during the pandemic and its potentially ambiguous association with precautionary behaviour and to thematically investigate the cultural narratives concerning trust in Danish society.

Theories of trust

Social scientific understandings typically position trust as the process enabling coordination and cooperation within groups and societies (e.g. Brewer, 2008; Kramer, 1999; Marková & Gillespie, 2011). Specific theories elaborate on the role of trust in health-related contexts and might help explain some of the observed variations in links between trust and health-protective behaviour. For example, the Trust Confidence and Cooperation (TCC) model (Earle & Siegrist, 2008), a model that has been applied to the context of pandemics (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014), draws a conceptual distinction between trust and confidence, both of which might support cooperation with others. Confidence is a lower level, or background, expectation based on past performance, whereas trust is a higher level and based on social relations, shared values and the willingness of the individual to make themselves vulnerable to the interests and actions of others. Especially in times of uncertainty, when past expectations cannot be relied on, trust becomes important for bridging gaps in confidence and supporting cooperation.

A more recent general model of self-protective versus risky behaviour—the social identity model of risk—similarly recognizes the social basis of trust (Cruwys et al., 2021; Rathbone et al., 2022). This model takes as its starting point the argument from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that group membership is an important aspect of individual self-concepts, and that perception of shared group membership leads individuals to incorporate specific others into their depersonalized sense of self (see also Turner, 1985). By encouraging self-other overlap, shared identity calibrates individual psychology and links this to interests shared with others by virtue of common group membership. While these processes have also been shown to facilitate positive outcomes within groups, like information sharing and cooperation (e.g. Brewer & Kramer, 1986; Greenaway et al., 2015), the social identity model of risk argues that they might also encourage harmful risk-taking. Precisely because we trust others, we might be less cautious around them and act in ways that contribute to individual and collective risk rather than safety. The role of heightened trust in mediating risk-taking within groups and health-risk behaviours in collective settings has been supported by both correlational and experimental evidence (Cruwys et al., 2021; Morton & Power, 2022).

These theories emerge from different traditions, yet they agree that trust is grounded in social processes (see Marková & Gillespie, 2011), including perceived similarities between agents of trust, shared values and shared identity. Although the TCC model highlights that risk communication and public cooperation will generally be easier when there is trust, the authors of this model are generally ambivalent about whether trust always supports positive, health-protective behaviour (Earle & Siegrist, 2008)—it depends on who is being trusted and in relation to what risk. The ambivalent meaning of trust for health risk versus safety is shared by the social identity model in which trust in others (based on their identity) facilitates effective risk communication (e.g. Ross et al., 2014) but also a willingness to take risk with those trusted others (Cruwys et al., 2021). As such, these models provide some insight into why trust in government and scientists might show different patterns of correlation with COVID recommendations compared to generalized social trust or trust in other members of the community.

A wider view on trust

The social dynamics of trust extend far beyond the immediate context within which trust has become relevant: trust is cultivated over time. Denmark, the setting for the current research, has a long history of citizen trust in government, meaning this resource could be quickly mobilized in response to an unexpected pandemic. This raises important questions of where trust between citizens and governments

comes from, and how it can be 'known' by the parties engaged in a trusting relationship. Existing theories of trust identify the inputs (e.g. shared identity) and consequences (e.g. risk-taking or compliance) of experienced trust, but the precise nature of trust to the individual experiencing it (or not) is not explicated. Providing some elaboration on this is a central contribution of this article. One suggestion we make is that to understand contemporary trust in Danish society, and the role it played during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to look to the past.

How individuals and collectives remember their pasts has implications for how they behave in the present. Particularly, collective memories offer cognitive and discursive frames for how members of the society think through and act in response to novel social challenges (Bartlett, 1932; Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Wagoner, 2017). Yet remembering the past is not simply recalling it. Instead, memories are narrated, and remembering is mediated through cultural schemas that direct both the flow and content of memories that are shared between people (Wagoner & Gillespie, 2014; Wertsch, 1997). In short, remembering is a social and cultural construction. Remembering also explicates social norms, cultural codes and moral outlooks and through these impacts the boundaries of individual action in the present. Taking a wider view of trust, by locating this within broader cultural and historical narratives, is important to expand insights from survey data. This wider view promises a deeper understanding of the meaning-making processes through which trust is established between members of the public and government and of how the mobilization of this might have created specific utilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current research

The importance of trust for understanding public responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has mostly been studied from a quantitative angle, and very little work has tried to unpack exactly how individuals within a society establish and experience trust. To elaborate on this understudied side of trust, we draw on in-depth interviews that were conducted as part of a wider survey of members of the Danish public over the first wave of the pandemic. Our survey included measures of trust in government, trust in other people and measures of behavioural compliance, allowing us to select individuals for interview who varied on these key dimensions of trust. Before presenting our analyses based on this empirical work, we detail the overall methodological approach within which the interviews were situated.

METHODOLOGY

Our mixed-methods project combines weekly standardized time-use surveys with qualitative interviews gathered during the first lockdown and reopening of Danish society This research progressed in two stages.

The Danish Corona Diary Study (DCDS) (Stage 1)

The DCDS is an online survey of Danish residents, offered in Danish and English and conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents were invited through various channels, including social and print media. As with similar surveys, our sample is quite selective in that some groups such as university-educated and foreign-born individuals are substantially overrepresented (and others underrepresented) relative to their respective population shares. Table A1 in the Appendix A displays unweighted sample demographics for the 2816 individuals who completed at least one interview. All analyses in this paper correct for selective survey participation by applying longitudinal (post-stratification) weights. The weights were obtained with the entropy balancing method (Hainmueller, 2012) and are designed to match the population shares of fine-grained groups defined by sex, age, education, urban versus rural residence and country/region of origin (reference shares are based on population registers and were provided by Statistics Denmark).

The DCDS was set up as a longitudinal study with weekly interviews. The first was conducted on 2 April 2020. After completion of their first interview respondents were asked for their consent to being recontacted. Those who agreed were invited for the next interview after 6 days, followed by up to two reminders in the following days. Participants did not receive another invitation/reminder unless they completed another interview (which would trigger the usual invitation for the next wave after 6 days). We kept recruiting respondents continuously until the survey was closed in July 2020. On average, respondents completed about four interviews, but some stayed for 15–16 weeks, until we stopped the weekly surveys.

The focus of the DCDS was on time use and the experience of daily activities, using instruments inspired by the 'Day Reconstruction Method' of Kahneman et al. (2004). The survey's most distinctive feature is the collection of information on three (first interview) or two (subsequent interviews) randomly selected activity episodes on the day before the interview. We first asked respondents when they woke up and when they fell asleep on the previous day. We then split awake time into two or three equally sized segments and randomly selected an 'anchoring time' within each segment. We then enquired about various features of the activity episode underway at each anchoring time, including start and end time, main activity (e.g. doing the dishes), any further (secondary) activities (e.g. listening to music while doing the dishes), where the activity took place (e.g. at home, at work, at someone else's home), and who—if anyone—they physically interacted with. We provided 17 predefined activity categories,[1] 9 predefined physical interaction partners,[2] and five places[3] to choose from. Alternatively, respondents could provide open-ended answers that were subsequently recoded—and, if possible, assigned to the predefined categories—by a research assistant.

In addition to the activity episodes, we also asked (changing) questions about respondents' attitudes towards a variety of relevant issues and stakeholders. During the initial two surveys, they were asked about their trust in parliament and their (generalized) trust in other people using standard instruments from the European Social Survey: 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please tell me on a score of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted'; 'Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust Denmark's Parliament. 0 means you do not trust Denmark's Parliament at all, and 10 means you have complete trust'. Since we continuously recruited new respondents, it is worth noting that all respondents went through the same cycle of surveys, irrespective of when they first joined. This means that all participants received the trust-related questions during their first two interviews, no matter when these took place.

Moreover, during every survey, participants were asked to rate their compliance with four health and hygiene recommendations on a 5-point Likert scale (0 'Not at all' to 5 'Very much'): 'To what extent do these statements apply to your past week? I stayed at home. I did not attend social gatherings. I kept a distance from other people. I washed my hands more often than I usually would'. All participants gave informed consent, and the study was positively reviewed by the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen.

In-depth Interviews (Stage 2)

Survey data allow us to revisit prior claims about the importance of trust in authorities and fellow citizens for general patterns of compliance during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark, yet these data are limited when it comes to comprehending more deeply people's experiences and the reasons for their behaviour (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Geertz, 1973; Shweder, 1991). To bridge this gap, in one iteration of the follow-up survey, we asked participants to indicate if they would be willing to be contacted for an in-depth interview in English, and 642 people agreed. From this pool, we purposefully selected a sample of interviewees representing the whole range of the different levels of trust expressed by respondents in our sample (see Figure 2 below). Twenty-one people agreed to be interviewed. The semi-structured

interviews lasted about 20–60 min and were conducted by the first author. All interviews took place online and were audio recorded with the permission of participants. All participants gave informed consent.

Interview questions were motivated to gain a temporal account of experiences of lockdown and subsequent reopening and to tap processes of meaning-making surrounding this. Interviews started by asking people about their memories of first hearing about COVID-19, the introduction of the lockdown and their feelings about this. We then asked about their daily experiences during the pandemic. Finally, we also invited respondents to imagine life beyond the pandemic. Through our questions, we aimed to probe deeper into the reasons behind feelings of trust in governments, institutions and other people—a theme that was already emerging in our own quantitative data and in wider political and scientific discussions of the pandemic. Respondents were asked questions concerning trust during the interview. These questions were modified to fit flow of the interview, but stemmed from simple questions, which were elaborated or probed depending on interviewee responses, such as 'Do you trust others in Denmark, including other people, government and authorities, during the pandemic—why or why not?' And 'If trust in institutions and other people is common in Denmark, can you explain where it comes from?'

Interviewees

Because our 21 interviewees were sampled from our larger survey, we can provide a brief portrait of each in terms of their location in the overall distribution of trust in Denmark during the first lockdown, a contextualization usually lacking in qualitative research. Another empirical paper, focused on people's imaginings of life after the pandemic, is based on the same cohort of interviews (Power et al., 2023).

Overall, we interviewed a broad sample of people living in Denmark, aged from late teens into their 70s. There were 13 people born and raised in Denmark. Two were from Italy and came to Denmark to study and later stayed to pursue employment opportunities. The other six were born, and grow up, in Cyprus, Romania, Spain, Hungary, Northern Ireland and Slovenia, before migrating to Denmark. From the overall interviewee cohort, some were young people who were finishing their studies, others were in the middle of their professional careers, and others still were older and at retirement age. Several were unemployed, others were in secure professional jobs, and there were reported disparities in income and wealth. Interviewees relationship status was mixed: some were single, others coupled, married, divorced, and others bereaved. The first author felt connected to the interviewees who openly shared their honest experiences in relation to the questions despite being interviewed online or over the phone.

Statistical analysis

Our large-scale time-use survey allows us to revisit prior claims about the importance of trust in securing citizen compliance with public health recommendations during the pandemic. We do so by regressing two measures of compliance, one bespoke measure based on activity episodes and a standard one based on self-reports, on respondent's trust in the Danish parliament and in generalized others. Below we first describe the operationalization of our measures and then briefly explain our regression modelling strategy.

Our activity sampling module with information on the activities, places and physical interaction partners during randomly sampled episodes on the day before each interview allows us to identify whether respondents were on their own or in the presence of other household members (i.e. indicating compliance), or whether they spent time with friends, acquaintances or other persons who are not part of their household (i.e. indicating non-compliance). To avoid ambiguous coding, we conservatively focus on the case of single or nuclear family households for whom the identification of physical interaction partners who are not part of the household is unambiguous. Moreover, we restrict the analysis sample to interviews conducted before 18 May 2020—the day restaurants and cafés were allowed to reopen. Finally, we summarize our binary episode-based compliance indicator to the person-interview level, so that for every interview, the count varies between 0 activity episodes during which the respondent was compliant,

to a maximum of two compliant activity episodes. This count variable is our main proxy for how well participants complied with the self-isolation and social-distancing requirements that were particularly strong during the first lockdown. Compared with the self-reports that predominate in the literature, such indirect activity-based measures of compliance should be less likely to be distorted by social desirability considerations.

In addition, we also analyse a standard compliance scale based on weekly self-reports about compliance with the four health and hygiene recommendations mentioned above (e.g. 'I did not attend social gatherings'). We used the first component of principal component analysis to combine the weekly answers to the four questions. The first component is the only one with an eigenvalue larger than 1 and explains 44% of the overall variance.

Our main predictors are the two questions on generalized trust in others and trust in the Danish parliament, averaged across the first two interviews to obtain two measures of trust for each person (the questions were dropped after the second interview). In addition to these outcomes and predictors, our statistical models control for the calendar week of the interview to adjust for a general time trend in compliant behaviour, as well as a range of person-level control variables: age, gender, immigrant origin, education, and household composition. We z-standardize all continuous variables, while gender, immigrant origin, education, and household composition are dummy coded.

We regress our two compliance measures on the two trust variables and all control variables using Bayesian linear random effects panel models. We use linear models because of the recent consensus that non-linear models entail more pitfalls and problems than they solve (Breen et al., 2018). The random effects account for the dependency between observations that arises because we conducted repeated interviews with the same persons. Following the recommendations of Heisig and Schaeffer (2019), our models contain person-specific random intercepts as well as a person-specific random slope for the interview week, which is the only predictor variable varying across the repeated observations. Because panel models with both random intercepts, slopes and their respective correlation often fail to converge under standard frequentist estimation, we use a Bayesian estimation approach with 4000 Monte Carlo iterations and a similarly sized burn-in. Our Bayesian estimation of the random effects panel models also ensures accurate statistical inference (Elff et al., 2021).

Qualitative analytic approach

We performed a thematic analysis of transcribed interview data because the flexibility of the approach allowed us to analyse them in several ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding was conducted by the first author and followed a deductive pattern on the first pass: it was informed by our theoretical comprehension of trust. Explicit and implicit discussion of 'trust' following questions about this were first highlighted in the text. Next, close coding of the entire transcribed interview data, informed by the initial and targeted coding, resulted in the generation of two overarching themes. The first is trust in others in Danish society. The second is a history of trust in Denmark. However, given the interviewer's familiarity with the transcribed text, latent or indirect expressions of 'trust' were also coded from repeated close readings of the transcribed material. This is an inductive—or theory building—aspect of the analysis. This second stage of the thematic analysis allowed us to deepen the content of our analysis by looking at latent, in combination with semantic, meanings in our interviewees' discourse. As such, following advice from Braun and Clarke (2006) the themes of trust in others and explanations of trust, are informed on the semantic level (an interpretation of what is said) and a latent level (what was meant) to create a more complete understanding of our interviewees intended meanings with, and phenomenological experiences during, the opening months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Combined, the deductive and inductive forms of analysis can be integrated into a complementary theory-derived and theory-building analytical approach, termed 'abduction' (Peirce, 1955). The abductive analysis overcomes the inherent limitations of each methodological approach when used in isolation and provides a more comprehensive

and holistic analysis to understand and meaningfully interpret the phenomenological experiences and meaning-making processes of our respondents.

Structure of the analyses

The analysis has two sections. In the first section, we report results from the quantitative survey and use this to again illustrate the importance of trust during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section is divided into two parts to represent the two overarching themes generated from our analysis. Part one focuses on trust in government and institutional policies during the outbreak of COVID-19. We use extracts from our interviewees' accounts to not only deepen our comprehension of the survey data but also to illustrate the ways in which the theme of trust in others is used by participants to make meaning of the global pandemic in a localized temporal and geographic context. In part two we show more interview extracts to illuminate the second theme: the origins of the high levels of trust in others in Denmark.

RESULTS

How did trust matter for securing compliant citizen behaviour during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring 2020? Our standardized survey allows us to revisit this question based on unique weekly time-use data. Figure 1 shows the results of two Bayesian linear random effects panel models—one predicting a z-standardized summary scale of self-rated compliance based on four items, the other a z-standardized scale of the number of episodes respondents spent home alone or only in the presence of other household members, thereby complying with the government regulations and recommendations. The top panel focuses on the core result of our models: the systematic association between trust in government and our two measures of compliance, along with the uncertainty of this association implied by the Bayesian models (i.e. 95% and 90% credible intervals as well as 100 random draws from the posterior distribution). The bottom panel displays the underlying full set of coefficients of the two models, including again the association between trust in government and our two measures of compliance.

As these analyses show, trust in authorities (here parliament) was positively linked to self-reported compliance, whereas generalized trust was negatively linked to this (i.e. in both cases, the 95% Bayesian credible intervals do not include zero). At first, this seems to confirm prior research documenting a positive role of trust in the government but a negative role of generalized trust (e.g. Olsen & Hjorth, 2020; Pagliaro et al., 2021; Woelfert & Kunst, 2020). On a closer look, however, the pattern for generalized trust does not hold when we use the less obtrusive episode data to measure compliance. When asked about what they did yesterday, respondents who trusted other people more did not systematically report having stayed home less often and having spent less time with friends and acquaintances during the episode. Although these results do still show a directionally negative association between generalized trust and episode-level compliance, this relationship is weak and statistically not significant.

Overall, then, the quantitative data confirm that trust in authorities systematically predicts compliance. People who trusted parliament more were more likely to say they complied with health recommendations, and they were also more likely to be home during any given episode and less likely to report activities that included friends and acquaintances. Consistent with previous research, we find that generalized trust in other people is negatively related to self-reported compliance. The picture looks different when we consider our rather unique episode-level compliance measure that captures respondents' propensity to spend time at home and without meeting friends or other people not belonging to the same household, where we find no clear evidence for an association.

Figure 2 situates the 21 interviewees within the overall distribution of trust—both in parliament and in others—expressed by all 2814 respondents.
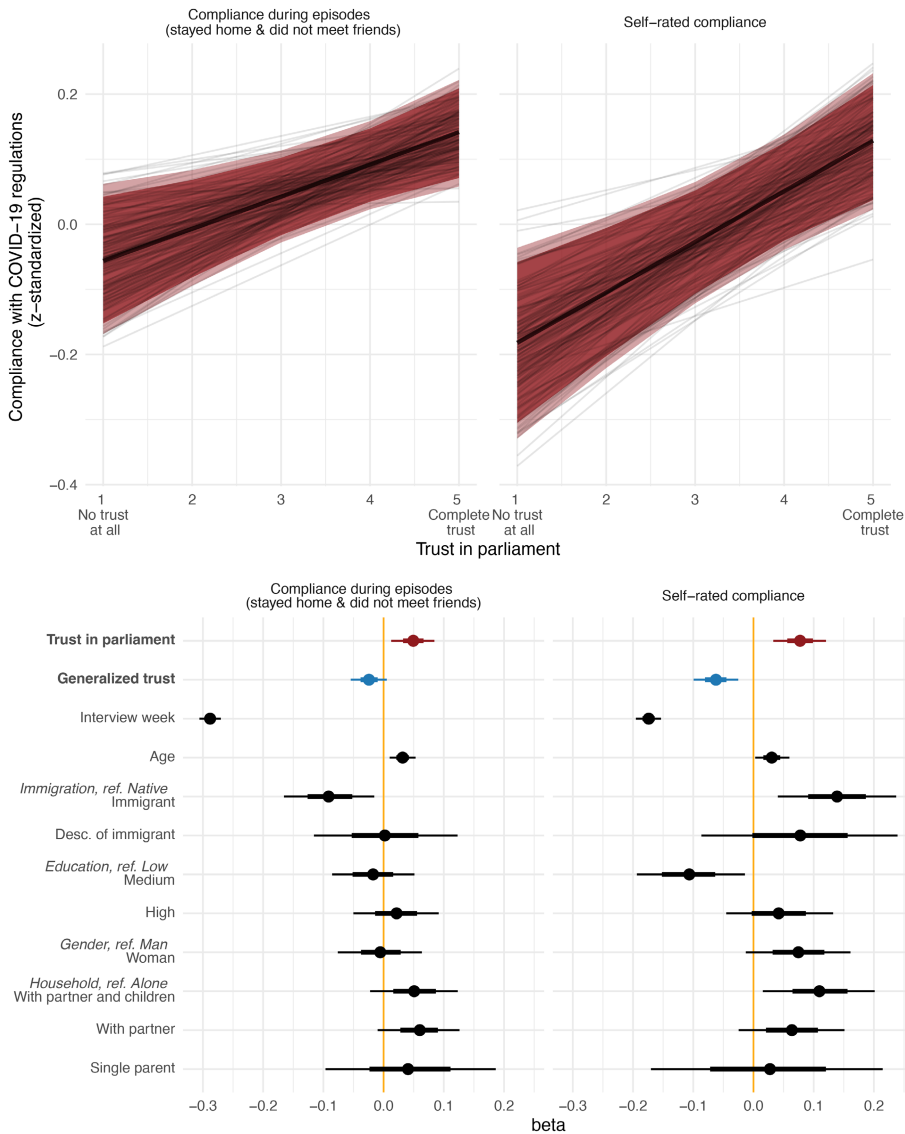
FIGURE 1 The importance of trust in securing compliant citizen behaviour during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results show median posterior estimates with 95% and 90% credible intervals from two post-stratification weighted Bayesian linear random effects panel models. $n = 6394$ respondent-time observations of 2315 respondents for self-rated compliance, and $n = 5438$ respondent-time observations of 1371 respondents for episode-based compliance.

Part 1: Trust in government, and institutional policies, during the outbreak of COVID-19

Figure 2 already reveals the well-established pattern of high trust in both authorities and other people among the population of Denmark (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2014)—most data points are clustered in the top right quadrant of the figure. Nevertheless, there is variation, and some people are less trusting—of politicians in parliament, other people, or both. As is also apparent from Figure 2, we sampled our 21 interviewees such that they represented the varying levels of trust expressed. In all 21 interviews, we asked respondents explicitly asked about the overall pattern. That is, they were asked: Why do people living in Denmark trust the government so much?
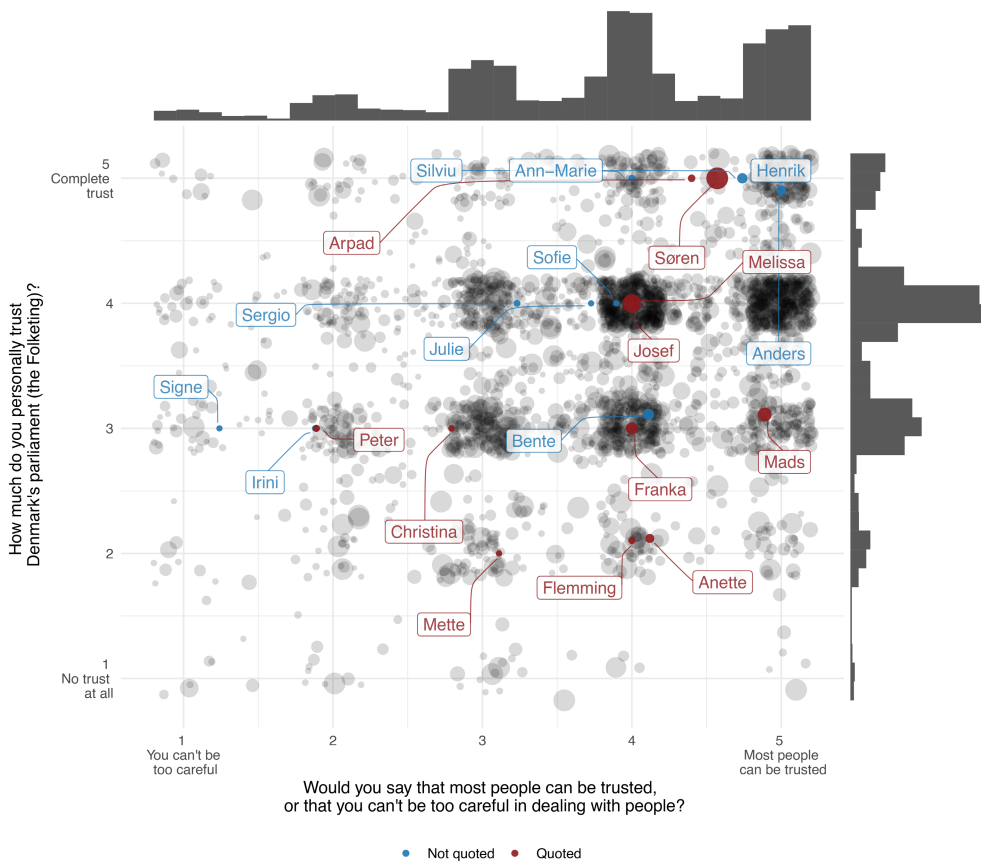
FIGURE 2   Interviewees reported trust in parliament and people.

Answers to this question varied in terms of individual details and perspectives but were largely congruent with the narrative of high Danish trust. For example, Søren was in Bangkok, Thailand, when Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, announced the closing of the borders on March 11th, 2020 (borders were closed on March 13th, 2020). Being away from home was 'drastic' according to Søren, as he was 'caught up in the possibilities to get back home because the flights were cancelled, and I went through a lot to get home'. However, despite the initial drama of the strict lockdown, cancellation of flights and unknowns surrounding the virus and possibilities to return home, Søren was highly complementary of the Danish government during the initial phases of this global pandemic. He stated

> Well, I was having a good feeling about it because I was on the list from the Foreign Ministry, so I was updated via mail all the time and I succeeded to get a new flight back home and had my children to take care of. So I never felt like… being alone, but the opposite, because I had a lot of communication with the people in the Danish Foreign Ministry, so I knew something was being arranged for people who were worse off than me, so that was okay. I felt good about it.

Søren highlighted the importance of effective communication with relevant people in the Danish Foreign Ministry. He did not feel 'alone'. Rather, he felt supported by the Danish government but also certain that other Danish people abroad 'who were worse off' were being aided as well. Søren's response highlights a broader sense of imagined community (Anderson, 1983) where unknown Danish nationals—also abroad during the initial lockdown and unfolding crisis—were supported by officials from the Danish govern-

ment. Implicit in his statement was a sense of trust placed in the Danish Foreign Ministry as evidenced by effective communication with both Søren and the imagined other Danes who were outside of Denmark.

Another quotation, from Franka, also illustrates the dynamics of trust between individuals and government during the initial phases of the pandemic. Like Søren's quote, the following extract serves as motivation for asking deeper questions about the generally high levels of trust in the parliament reported in the quantitative data. Franka told us:

> I know why I trust the government and the way they've handled it [COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown]. And it's mainly the transparency of Mette Frederiksen as a leader… Her way of articulating it and her narrative of the entire situation has been like: "Okay, let's just try our best!" I know… if it had been another [political] party I would not have trusted them as much, because I would question their intentions. I would be concerned about whether they would do it for the people or for the economy. So if I found that it was mainly because of taking care of the economy, I would probably not have been as compliant. But because I know that the Social Democrats with Mette Frederiksen - I trust them more because she is transparent about why and how.

Franka revealed both the transparency and person-centred (rather than economically motivated) nature of the sitting Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen was one reason she both trusted the government and was compliant with their wishes. Yet, she spoke broadly about the humanistic concerns, and the vulnerability of acknowledging the unknown "let's just try our best," with a focus on ensuring Danish citizens have looked after.

Further developing this idea is Arpad. He was a middle-aged, unemployed man, who grew up on the 'other side of the Iron Curtain,' in Hungary, but has lived in Denmark for an unreported number of years. When he was interviewed, he suffered some tragedies. Within the last 5 years, his son had died, he had divorced, lost his job, and was now living alone. However, despite this hardship, and associated suffering, he was optimistic about how the Danish government was handling the pandemic. Like Franka, he appreciated the humanistic focus of the government. This impacted him directly. When asked why people in Denmark trust the government, he responded by saying:

> I am coming from Hungary, where people traditionally don't trust the government. So, I am not in a bias to above all trusting any government, but the measures the government did. Personally, I have no job since a year. You know when I thought that the government has many more important things, much more important things to care about than jobless people and then I read that they were thinking about those who are on A-Kasse [unemployment benefits] and they were saying that they will pay the A-Kasse. It is a bit complicated to say, because when one is on A-Kasse, there is a time limit, two years of time limit. And this lockdown fell into this time limit, and one could fear that he could lose two months of […] while this lockdown is there because he or she cannot look for a job. And the government was thinking about this, and they said that this lockdown months will not count into this time limit. And I was very… I was surprised that the government had resources and time to think about these people and it is really… I liked.

Arpad made several important points. First, he gave an empirical example of what Franka stated: the government had a humanistic concern. Arpad informed us that he is on jobseekers' allowance, which normally lasts only for 2 years. The lockdown meant he could not easily continue looking for jobs for those months. However, instead of being penalized by having these 2 months deducted from the total of 24 months, the government excluded these lockdown months from the overall allowance. This alleviated his 'fear' and illustrates how the government took effective action and allocated resources to think about him, and other unemployed people. Second, he also stated that he is from Hungary and indicates that people do not axiomatically trust their governments. Implicit in his statement is the idea he trusted the

Danish government because of their focus on the lives of citizens, including vulnerable citizens like him, who are unemployed. Later in his interview, he stated that 'I had a kind of solidarity with the Danish government, because, with the measures it took to contain the Coronavirus infections and it was a kind of war on this front and I think we as citizens could help the government to not go anywhere [by not going anywhere]'. One consequence of citizens trusting the government is that people, like Arpad, will comply with policies and directives given by governments, and associated institutions, in a reciprocal relationship that ought not to be taken for granted (as the lack of trust in the Hungarian government indicates).

Yet, one Danish respondent emphasized that the Danish government has a responsibility or even obligation to take care of vulnerable people in their charge. This is because people living in Denmark pay high taxes and can therefore, reciprocally, expect the government to take care of them during both national crises (e.g. pandemics) and individual crises (e.g. sickness, unemployment). Contrasting with the interpretations of Arpad and other interviewees, the Danish government's actions appear less as an act of kindness and natural human-centeredness in this perspective and rather as the fulfilment of an (at least partly) implicit contract. Anette, was a young student, struggling to write her MA thesis when she was interviewed. She told us

> All-and-all, I do trust the system and I do trust that it's here to make us safe…What I've been saying, at least about Denmark, is that when you are in a country that has this kind of social contract that we pay so much money of our [own] into that and we do trust this system a lot. Then a system like that cannot really afford to not like swoop in and take care all of the people that are not strong in the society, like elderly and people who have illnesses. Like, there is, especially for the Scandinavian countries, like very… like you just have to do this, because otherwise the whole system would be like: 'Well, then, why are we doing this? Why are we putting so much time and effort into this system?'

Anette stated she trusts the Danish government—much like other Scandinavian citizens trust their governments—because these citizens have put so much time and monetary resources into developing the system. The system itself is supported by high taxation—'we pay so much of our money'—and the system then supports 'people who are not strong in society' such as the elderly, ill people or those who are unemployed. Interestingly, to justify her axiomatic assumption the government should support those in need because taxpayers generously contribute to the greater good, she rhetorically asked "Why are we putting so much time and effort into this system?' with the implication being that people only pay into the system so it can support them when they need it.

Other respondents were more directly critical of the relationship between themselves and the government yet were still high in self-reported trust in the government and other citizens, and were largely compliant with COVID hygiene policies recommended by the government and its institutions. Mette informed us, for example, that Danish people, like her, are often critical of the government but nonetheless supportive of their COVID-19 lockdowns and related policies.

> I actually still agree with the decisions that the government had made. I'm also a critical person towards politicians and systems and so, so it's not that. But I actually agree with it [lockdown policies] …maybe they have realized the (…) [seriousness] and the danger of this matter.

In summary, this first part of the qualitative analysis, developed from initial codes—formalized into an overarching theme of trust in others during the outbreak of COVID-19—shows how people living in Denmark reported high levels of trust in their government during the dramatic lockdown and subsequent reopening of society that unfolded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship, though not without its criticisms, is reciprocal and for many interviewees stemmed primarily from the humanistic— rather than economic—orientation taken by the government in the early days of the pandemic, with others emphasizing a more instrumental or contractual give-and-take. In both cases, albeit in different

ways, trust in politics and the government is inherently reciprocal. However, fully understanding this reciprocity between the government and the people may require attention to the long history of trust within the localized Danish context. In fact, 'the origin and history of Danish trust in government' is a second theme that was abductively created from our interviews, as we now elaborate in part two of this analysis.

Part 2: The origin and history of trust in the Danish government

Trust between the Danish government and Danish citizens (as well as residents without citizenship) has both a short and long history. In the short term, during COVID-19, trust was built through clear and effective communication. This was evidenced in a point made by Christina, an Italian woman in her 20s, who had lived in Denmark for some years. Comparing the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, between Italy and Denmark, she stated

> they did this thing right, in the right time, and also, I think that the trust about the government is also about the right time of doing a right discourse, the right press conference. Because, for example, Denmark didn't have that many press conferences. Instead in Italy, every day was a press conference. And this stressed a lot of people… They (the Danish government) know that they did the right work, and they weren't doing random things in general. So that may have helped a lot for the trust in the government.

She stated in Italy there was frequent communication about the virus—its physical and societal consequences in terms of lockdowns and various restrictions. In contrast, in Denmark, she is appreciative of the more focused and 'planned' approach. Despite the unfamiliarity of the situation, clear and concise information helped ease anxiety, create legitimacy in government planning, and led to trust in government decisions.

But trust in Danish authorities is not simply related to the decisions, policies, and spokespeople surrounding the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. When Peter, a middle-aged Danish man, was asked why people living in Denmark responded with such high compliance and trust in authorities, he suggested trust is high in all Danish institutions:

> We know that the government and the Serum Institute and healthcare, that they are going to manage the things. And we normally trust in police and fire brigades and all this kind of stuff. It's a normal behavior for us.

Not only was trust in the Serum Institute [the official Danish organization for disease research, Statens Serum Institut] high, but it was also high in other visible Danish institutions such as the police and fire-fighting service. Trust was so ingrained in these institutions, according to Peter, that it is 'normal' to follow guidelines in dangerous situations.

Delving deeper, Josef said trust in Danish democratic institutions has been built up since the foundation of the democratic state. He was trusting of the minority government, led by the Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, but believed this trust had accumulated over time based on the development of democratic ideals:

> I trust the (…) government right now - Mette Frederiksen - I really trust that she's doing it for the best of the people and she's doing it the best she can. And I feel that's been for a long time. When you look at history or you look like at the last 150 years of the government and how it has evolved and, you know, and it's always been for the better, somehow. You know, the welfare state has been just getting better… And I feel that they have done that, yeah, since the democracy in Denmark started.

A similar observation of a maturing Danish socialist democracy was articulated by Melissa. She was from Northern Ireland, worked in theatre and had been living in Denmark, with her husband, for several years. She observed

> I think for me it's because the government reflects the people, you know. We have this coalition… you're not going to make everyone happy, obviously, but you must find a way of working together and I think the idea of like samarbejde, of working together is like an important thing in Denmark. So, when you see the politicians doing that and maybe talking to each other and finding solutions. And like you would have to do work and in your everyday, you can always just put your foot down and say: "That's my way!" And that for me gives a lot of trust. And… I think as well, like, there's not as much extreme poverty here… Everyone is on a kind of equal level in terms of pay and like social welfare and getting all this kind of thing. I think that's possibly why I trust this country as well; you don't have this massive imbalance between rich and poor.

Melissa's detailed answer illustrates three important points regarding Danish democracy. First, she observed the typical form of coalition governments means multiple viewpoints, including nuances, and contradictions, are represented, and through these constructive compromises can be reached. Second, she highlighted how this representation means people work together *samarbejde* and creates a sense of cohesion important to building and maintaining trust. Finally, she also stated this sense of working together is both predicated on, and resultant in, a relative form of economic equality. This equality, within a wealthy country, means not a large gap between those with higher wealth and income and those with lower wealth and income.

The historical lineage of Danish democracy was extended by another respondent, Mads:

> Have you ever read the book: "When Vikings Fight"? …It's a very interesting book (…) one of the things that they take up is that we have a high degree of trust in our governments and they relate it all the way back to the Viking age, where the way Denmark survived and the way we work is that basically we are a very small country and a very small population, so the only way we can make everything work and be successful is if we trust in and if we collaborate and corroborate.

Here Mads illustrates how deep and ingrained trust is within Danish society. It stretches back to the age of the Vikings and is associated with cultural homogeneity within the Danish state. Everything can work and be successful, in a small country, according to Mads, if there is trust and collaboration, for instance, in dealing with COVID-19.

The lineage of trust between governmental authorities and citizens, steeped in history, also manifests as trust between people living within Denmark. For some non-Danes, living in Denmark, the contrast between the highly trusting Danes and the disruptions to life in other E.U. nations was difficult to comprehend. But for the Danes, we interviewed this is axiomatic. When asked if he trusted other people during the pandemic, Flemming, a 74-year-old Danish man, implicitly draws on the culturally widespread, historically ingrained, sense of trust in Denmark, and asserted with confidence:

> Yes, of course, of course. All my friends, and we have seen a lot of friends in the last two months. Not in the beginning. First, I think in the first two months we didn't see any people. Yes, okay, we saw a couple close us. It was the only people we saw in the first two months. We didn't see our daughter, our grandchild. It was first after two months and still it was with some distance. And there were some people sitting together at some dinner with us, but it was a big table where there (laughs) was two meters between people. But today I think we are, what do you say, a little bit more conformed with the things we must do…I like to have a massage, you know (laughs). Next week I'll go to the dentist, and I have also been at the

barber shop. I trust the, like, I think that the Danish people are acting well in the Corona time.

Flemming suggested he maintained social distancing when told by the government. Even in the presence of others, such as at his dining table, he said they maintained the necessary distance. Overall, implicitly drawing on historically prevalent trust, he was highlighting trusting of other Danish people—as he explicitly stated—at both the beginning and end of this extract, with an example from his own life, to illustrate the measures Danes—like him and his friends and family—go through during the coronavirus pandemic.

In section 1 of the analysis, drawing on quantitative data, we showed how trust predicts compliance with government directives concerning COVID-19. In the second section, divided into two parts, we first developed a theme illustrating the immediate impact reciprocal trust between government and citizens had on compliance with lockdown and related COVID-19 policies. We also described theme two, developing an understanding of the historical narratives recalled by respondents to explain why Denmark has such high degrees of trust in government and how this trust was also related to other citizens. We conclude by articulating the lessons from our case study analysis for developing reciprocal trust between citizens and governments and their lessons for advancing democracy.

CONCLUSION

In the localized Danish context, where trust is high in comparison to countries like the U.K. and the U.S.A., reciprocal trust between citizens and societal institutions arguably helped slow the spread of the virus and may have saved lives by preventing illness and overcrowding of hospitals. This interpretation is broadly supported by a range of previous studies linking individual and societal trust to better outcomes during the pandemic and outbreaks of earlier infectious diseases around the globe. At the same time, some of those previous studies have raised concerns regarding a potentially negative link between social trust between citizens and public health-compliant behaviour. In contrast to the beneficial role of trust in institutions which helps to facilitate compliance to public health measures, high social trust among citizens has by some been described as reducing caution and weariness both of which are important and healthy during a pandemic (e.g. Olsen & Hjorth, 2020; Pagliaro et al., 2021; Woelfert & Kunst, 2020).

The present research drew on data derived from a novel adaptation of the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman et al., 2004) to the COVID-19 context, including both quantitative measures and qualitative interviews with selected respondents. These data provide further support to previous observations of an association between high levels of trust in government and compliance with COVID-19 measures, but they question claims that social trust is associated with lower levels of compliance: While we do find evidence of such a relationship for global self-reports of compliance, we do not find a clear association for a more direct measure of distancing behaviour based on diary-like reports of how people used their time and whether they spent it with non-household members.

These two insights find further elaboration in the lived experiences of respondents during the first lockdown in Denmark from 2 April to 18 May 2020, and the ways in which trust was implicated and understood by individuals at this time. Congruent with previous quantitative research, our data again reveal a systematic relationship between trust in authorities and compliant behaviour. People who trusted parliament more, not only stated that they complied with health recommendations on direct measures, but on our indirect measure of compliance, they were also more likely to be home during any given episode and less likely to report activities that included friends and acquaintances. Although our data also replicated the suggested negative link between generalized trust and compliance, the detrimental side of social trust was only observable for self-rated compliance and not in the actual activities of participants. As such, any negative implications of social trust seem less predictable than the benefits of trust in authorities.

Following suggestions offered by Power et al. (2018), we augmented the quantitative data obtained by our weekly diary survey with in-depth qualitative interviews. This method allowed us to delve deeper into people's lived experiences during the early days of COVID-19 and how they made meaning of the

developing pandemic. We developed two overarching themes concerned with trust: trust in others in Danish society and the history of trust in Denmark. These themes, developed by an abductive thematic analysis of interview data, are congruent with previous theorizings, such as the social identity model of risk, that recognizes the social basis of trust (Cruwys et al., 2021). It also highlights the impact trust has in forming reciprocal relationships between citizens and governments to act during crises (Markova & Gillespie, 2007, 2011).

Although our quantitative analysis also demonstrates that trust is key to compliance during the lockdown, the qualitative data permitted a wider insight into how historically ingrained, and culturally widespread, reciprocal trust between citizens and governments is narrated. Our respondents constructed historical narratives to explain why people in Denmark are so trusting of government. The past allows individuals to smooth over societal and personal ruptures caused by the unexpected (Bartlett, 1932; Wagoner, 2017)—so too, in the pandemic shared narratives of history made the unfamiliar seem familiar and less uncertain and threatening. The narratives invoked by our respondents revolve around a well-established historical lineage of sensible, people-orientated, laws and policies. This formed a powerful master narrative to help explain why people in Denmark were so trusting of their government during the initial unprecedented lockdown in March 2020.

We overcame the methodological problems usually associated with using one method by innovatively using quantitative and qualitative methods to augment one another (Power et al., 2018) as the societal phenomenon developed over time (Power & Velez, 2020).

Despite these advancements, our study has limitations. All interviewees, except one, for instance, spoke English as their second language. It is conceivable that respondents might have been able to articulate their responses more clearly in their native language. Moreover, no interviews were conducted in person, and however connected the interviewer and interviewees felt at the time, and on further reflection, in-person interviews may have led to different accounts of people's experiences during lockdown and reopening, different interpretations of that data, and alternate conclusions than the ones drawn here.

But this is not simply a story about the evidence presented in the local Danish context. Our evidence suggests the importance of developing *reciprocal trust* between governments and citizens over time, and points to the importance of transparent, non-corrupt, and humanistic policies and laws aimed at improving people's lives, coupled with a belief that people in society are treated equitably and share a common framework for thinking through fairness. By cultivating this approach, contemporaneously and historically, governments could expect compliance from citizens in return. This offers insights into how other nations might strive for increased mutual trust for more harmonious and peaceful democracies—but it also highlights that and why such trust cannot be built overnight.

Given that trust is fundamental to a well-functioning democracy, future research might examine the ways in which governments can cultivate increased and prolonged reciprocal trust between different groups within society and between citizens and those in governmental and institutional authority (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2014). In this way, psychology—in its theoretical, empirical, methodological and ethical advances—has an important part to play in 'world-making' (Power et al., 2023). That is, psychological research into topics such as trust is not a passive bystander. Rather, the types of knowledge produced impact the world, thus altering it, creating the possibility for future research findings on mutual trust to generate more meaningful civic and governmental relations and, ultimately, more cohesive democracies (Moghaddam, 2016).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Séamus A. Power and Merlin Schaeffer involved in conceptualization, analysis, writing the original draft, review and editing and funding acquisition. **Jan P. Heisig** involved in conceptualization, analysis, review and editing and funding acquisition. **Rebecca Udsen** involved in analysis and editing. **Thomas Morton** involved in conceptualization, writing, analysis, review and editing and funding acquisition.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

We cannot share the interview data because we did not get approval from interviewees to make it public. The full survey data set cannot be published because of consent and anonymity agreements, but the survey data used in the present analysis can be obtained from the researchers upon request.

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APPENDIX A

See Table A1.

TABLE A1   Unweighted sample demographics.

	Mean		SD
Age	42.8		14.2
		N	Pct.
Immigrant origin			
No immigrant origin		1839	65.4
Immigrant		810	28.8
Desc. of immigrant		151	5.4
Household type			
Alone		756	26.9
Single parent		98	3.5
With flatmates		286	10.2
With flatmates and children		36	1.3
With partner		821	29.2
With a partner and children		796	28.3
Education			
Low		947	33.7
Medium		898	31.9
High		889	31.6
Gender			
Woman		2120	75.3
Man		682	24.2
Other		10	0.4