Reasons for High School Students to Mistrust Most People: A Study in the Context of Values Education

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Abstract

This study aims to determine high school students' reasons for mistrust other people. In this qualitative study, the data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The study group was selected by using the purposeful sampling method of criterion sampling. 87 students in the study group were asked to complete open-ended questions and 10 were invited for interviews. The data collection techniques in the study were the open-ended form designed by the researcher and a semi-structured interview form. The content analysis showed that students did not trust other people as everyone thinks about their own self-interest, the human nature was not reliable, people today were different, people might disappoint, it was hard to know people, people did not keep secrets, and money controlled everyone. These findings were discussed in relation to values education and the recommendations were made for educational institutions.

Key Words

Interpersonal Trust, Trust in Humans, Mistrust, Cynicism, Values Education.

Trust is having positive expectations on other people's future behaviors or intentions (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; Rotter, 1967; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Sztompka, 2001). Trust is also defined as one party being sure that the other party will not abuse their weaknesses (Korczynski, 2003), lack of feelings such as worry and fear (Solomon & Flores, 2001). Trustful behavior reflects concepts such as moral duties and promises (Tyler & Kramer, 1996). When explaining trust building behaviors, value laden terms such as virtue, morality, good (Kipnis, 1996), sin-

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cerity, authenticity, honesty and honor (Solomon & Flores). Research on trust lends significant support to the idea that trust has a moral base. However, trust is also built on information on other people (Uslaner, 2001). At the same time, trust is an important strategy to cope with the unpredictable, vague and uncontrollable future (Sztompka).

Trust is examined in four headings: basic trust, simple trust, blind trust, and real trust. Basic trust is considered basic because it generally starts without much thought and provides a general orientation towards the world. In simple trust which does not require thought, informed preference, research or justification, there is no place for doubt (Solomon & Flores, 2001). Usually, a big part of human life involves and unconscious and spontaneous trust, instead of conscious trust behaviors (Blois, 1998). Blind trust does not include rational evaluation and is unconditional (Nooteboom, 2002). Real trust arises when caution, calculation, thinking and conditions enter the process of trust (Solomon & Flores). Sztompka (2001) states that trust in others requires a certain level of self-confidence.

Trusting People

Trusting in people is giving the message that they are adequate with respect to character values and cognitive competencies. A trusted person receives the message "you know your responsibilities, are moral and adequate" and feels honored. While our schools teach being trustworthy as a value, they do not view trusting others as a value (Akbaş, 2004). When secondary school curricula are examined, it can be seen that values and affective characteristics do not have a prominent place, and the values of reliability and trust do not appear at all (MEB, 2011).

Mistrust

Mistrust describes a negative expectation about other people's behaviors (Lewicki et al., 1998). Previous research has shown that people tend to mistrust rather than trust. The strongest and most effective learning function of the brain is to retain and automatically use stimuli created by threats (Ladoux, 2006). People also tend to over emphasize the power of personal benefits that motivate the behaviors of others (Miller & Ratner, 1998). They are keen to consider themselves more ethical, fair and sociable than others (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Fetchenhauer & Dunning, 2009; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). Delaney (2010) also contends that people believe they are more ethical than others, and Gough (2002) writes that people tend to believe "I am good, but you are not".

In a study titled "I'm ok-You're ok", Thomas Harris (1973) explains the concept of "life positions". An individual may have the life position "I'm ok, you're not" due to certain life experiences. People with this position stay introverted and defensive throughout their lives. They think "I can do it, you can't, and others are not to be trusted". Frequently receiving the message "don't trust others" also reinforces the positions "I'm ok, you're not-I'm not ok, you're not ok" (Akkoyun, 2007).

Cynicism

Cynicism is an inclination to believe that people motivated by self interest rather than honor and sacrifice (Oxford Dictionary, 2012). The common point in definitions of cynicism is that the principles of honesty, fairness and sincerity are traded for self interest (Abraham, 2000; Eisinger, 2000; Mirvis & Kanter, 1991; Özler, Atalay, & Şahin, 2010).

Cynicism creates feelings such as mistrust, anger, hopelessness, and disappointment in people. These feelings result from previous experiences (Andersson, 1996; Thompson, Bailey, Joseph, Worleys, & Williams, 1999). They are particularly shaped by the behaviors of people who are considered friend and confidante (Çaylı, 2008). An orientation toward the peer group, and the importance attached to secrecy and trust among adolescents (Bacanlı, 2007) makes keeping secrets even more important.

Cynicism and Mistrust in Turkey and in the World

In the United States, 44, 2% of whites, 16,1% of blacks, 58,% of university graduates and 26,3% of non-graduates state that most people can be trusted (Glaeser, Laibson, Sheinkman, & Soutter, 2000). An association has also been observed between income level and trusting others. It was found that 43,6% of high income earners and 31% of unemployed people state that others can mostly be trusted (Sztompka, 1999). Uslaner (2001) wrote that interpersonal trust is related to an increase in voluntary work, social aid for the needy, tolerance, less corruption and better management. Anheier and Kendall (2002) established an association between non-profit voluntary organizations and interpersonal trust. Trust was associated with agreeableness, extraversion, and negative neuroticism (Evans & Revelle, 2008).

Theoretical studies on the Turkish culture show that cynicism is rather prevalent in the country. Dökmen (2008) writes that Turks are very picky about other people's ethics but are quite lenient about it when it comes to themselves. In the Turkish leg of the global values study, people were asked "In your opinion, can most people be trusted?". In 1990, 10% of the respondents replied "yes", while in 2007 11.8% did (Esmer, 1999; Kalaycıoğlu, 2008). According to Medrano's (2010) trust index, Türkiye follows Trinidad -Tobago and Rwanda as the bottom third coutnry in relation to interpersonal trust. Ekmekçi (2010) claims that there is a general feeling of mistrust in most Turkish people. In a study aiming to establish the cynicism levels of hotel workers, Tokgöz and Yılmaz (2008) points out that 86,4% has moderate or high levels of general cynicism.

Interpersonal mistrust and cynical thought would evidently affect class and workplace behaviors negatively. However, even though many national and international studies in the literature report low levels of interpersonal trust, there is no study on the reasons for mistrust. This study aims to determine the reasons why high school students do not trust most people. The study also makes recommenda-

tions to secondary education institutions regarding values education in order to minimize mistrust and cynical thought.

Method

This study was a qualitative one whose method is defined by Yıldırım and Şimşek (2006) as research that makes use of qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview, and document analysis, and follows a qualitative process in the revelation of perceptions and phenomena in their natural environment and in a realistic and holistic way.

Study Group

The study group was selected by using the purposeful sampling method of criterion sampling. When the sample was being formed, the following criteria were considered: gender, grade level, socio-economic level, achievement, willingness to participate. The study was conducted with 11th grade students attending Anatolian Teacher Education Schools, Anatolian schools and regular high schools that fit in the criteria and were located in the center of Kırıkkale. A total of 104 eleventh graders from these schools were asked "In your opinion, can most people be trusted?", and 87 students who replied "no" supplied their views in writing. Ten students from the same schools who had not answered the previous question and reported mistrust in writing were interviewed.

Data Collection Tools

Open-Ended Question Forms: With a form containing open-ended questions, students' personal data, trust perceptions and reasons for mistrust were collected in writing. The advantage of open-ended questions is that the researcher can obtain rich and detailed information, as well as unexpected responses (Büyüköztürk, 2005). The form asked students: "In your opinion, can most people be trusted?" and required them to answer either "Yes" or "No". Students who did and did not trust others were asked to write down their reasons in detail. The question "In your opinion, can most people be trusted?" is one of the key questions on the World Values Survey (The World Values Survey Association, 2011) and many trust studies (Alesina & Ferrara, 2002; Fukuyama, 2001; Kawachi, Kennedy, & Glass, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Yamagishi, Kikuchi, & Kosugi, 1999).

Semi-Structured Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten high school students from the third grade one to one. At the beginning of the interviews, the students were informed regarding the goal of the research. During the interviews, questions including perceptions, knowledge, feelings, values, and experiences were asked (Patton, 2002). The questions asked during the interviews included "Explain your reasons for not trusting most people?", "Have you experienced an event that causes mistrust?" The interviews were kept longer than 15 minutes so that the interviewees would warm up to the researcher and the questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Data Anlysis

As stated by Merriam (1998), all qualitative data analysis is actually content analysis. The first step was coding, followed by the classification of data, and the forming of categories depending on content (Tavşancıl & Aslan, 2001).

Analysis of Data Collected by the Form with Open Ended Questions: Frequency analysis is a type of content analysis that reveals the quantitative frequency of units (Tavşancıl & Aslan, 2001). The continuous comparison method includes the stages of open coding, integrative coding and selection-association (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the open coding stage, the meaning and thinking of concepts are unveiled depending on the purpose of the study and the text. What is important in this stage is for the researcher to complete the coding without being affected by the theoretical structure. In the integrative coding stage, categories and subcategories are formed. These are linked to each other in the following selection-association stage, and the central category is selected (Pitney & Parker, 2002). The central category was called "the reasons for high school students to mistrust others".

Analysis of Data Collected by Semi-structured Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with students were audio recorded with their consent. The recordings were saved on the computer, played on various programs, and transcribed.

Reliability of the Study

Triangulation was done by collecting data with different methods from different resources, and explaining it with different theoretical information (Denzin, 1989). As conducting the research with different perspectives, at different times and

on different groups increases quality (Marvasti, 2004), semi-structured interviews were held in the same schools, at different times and with different students.

Results

Student responses to the open-ended questions and the interviews showed that their reasons for mistrust could be grouped in 7 categories: thinking only of self-interest, mistrust in human nature, changing people of our day, disappointment, not knowing people, not keeping secrets and doing anything for money.

In the category of self-interest, all of the students attributed their mistrust in other people to either looking for benefits in everything or looking after self-interest. Approximately 37% of the students stated this. The students who stated their mistrust in the nature of humans was 17,23%. In this dimension, one student explained his reasons for mistrust as follows: "*everyone has a dark face* (FE65)." Another student from the category of changing people explained her reason as follows: "*because people have changed. They no longer act like humans. We have lost decency, honesty. (FK73).*" The fourth category was disappointment**.** Here, 21,83% of students attributed their mistrust to previous disappointing experiences. Approximately 5% mentioned not knowing people as their reason for not trusting them. The sixth category was keeping secrets. Students in this category stated that they did not trust people because they do not keep secrets. In the seventh category, respondents stated people's tendency to do anything for money as their reason for mistrust.

Discussion

The findings may be explained by referring to an attitude of cynicism, which contends that people only look after their own benefits and considers everyone to be interested in self-interest. Other characteristics of cynicism that overlap with the findings of this study are honesty, fairness and sincerity coming secondary to personal benefits (Özler et al., 2010), people being self-centered (Mirvis & Kanter, 1991), a strong mistrust for other people (Abraham, 2000), mistrust for the human nature (Eisinger, 2000) and disappointment in relationships with the society and other people (Mirvis & Kanter). Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) state that trust building relies on some key factors such as talent, helpfulness and honesty as well as values related to moral integrity such as keeping promises

and secrets. The belief that humans can do anything for money is also a reflection of cynicism. People with this belief replace benefits and interests with "money". According to this perception, other people's behaviors are motivated not by honor or sacrifice, but by money. Students who believe that people have changed have a negative perception of other people. It is repeatedly mentioned that corruption and loss of values that build trust happens today and in this time. On the other hand, students in the category of not knowing people did not trust anyone other than their family and close friends. The findings corroborate the reasons of mistrust in the literature that strangers cannot be trusted, people will try to abuse others when given a chance, and they care more about their self interest rather than helping others (Kalaycıoğlu, 2008).

The findings can also be explained by referring to Harris (1973) life positions. The view "you're not ok" exists in all dimensions but not knowing people. Even though the data obtained here do not offer an explanation of how individuals perceive themselves, they do not match the life position "I'm ok, you're not ok.". According to Akkoyun (2007), our society often gives the message "do not trust people" – they are not ok – to individuals. Not trusting people and arranging behaviors in accordance reinforce the positions "I'm good, you're not-I'm not good, you're not good".

Research in other disciplines conducted to explore the reasons behind mistrust for others has shown that mistrust has physiological, psychological and sociological reasons. Ladoux (2006) concludes that stimuli motivated by threat comprise the strongest learning function of the brain. This shows that a previous experience which caused mistrust will always affect behavior.

Activities to decrease cycnicsm should be prioritized in schools because the negative feelings induced by cynicism, which emphasizes the tendency of humans to look after their self interest and considers everyone else to be self-seekers, have adverse effects on cooperation, higher-order cognitive behaviors and creativity. It may also be recommended that the social service practice course offered at education faculties should be incorporated into secondary education curricula, and activities and projects that aim to internalize the value of altruism should be used. Trust should be taught as a value like being trustworthy, and real trust which is built on caution, thought and rationality should be emphasized as opposed to unconditional trust built on dependence. In addition, giving positive

contemporary models in addition to models from history, including keeping secrets as a value in curricula, and giving cultural examples to trusting human nature may also decrease mistrust. The findings of this study may also be taken into account when choosing values to include in elementary and secondary curricula.

This study aimed to identify the reasons for high school students not to trust most people. An initial literature survey revealed that there were not enough studies on interpersonal trust and mistrust conducted by educational scientists. Cynicism and mistrust not only curb people's higher-order cognitive skills and desire for cooperation, but also undermine the bases of the concept of service which democracy is built upon (Ökmen & Demir, 2010). For educational institutions to develop strategies to combat interpersonal mistrust and cynical thought, studies on different dimensions of the topic should be conducted. Also, the concept of mistrust which is reflected in the expression "don't even trust your father" should be explored in detail through interdisciplinary studies.

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