Trust allows individuals to engage in more interactions and to take advantage of more opportunities. People with more social trust, the general belief that most people can be trusted, tend to be healthier and more satisfied with their lives, and societies with more trust enjoy faster economic growth (e.g., Giordano, Mewes, and Miething 2019; Helliwell, Huang, and Wang 2018; Kawachi 2018). Similarly, trust in public institutions and officials gives people reason to support their governments taking more actions, including some which may be vital for societal well-being (e.g., Fairbrother 2016; Goubin and Kumlin 2022).

Although there is a large scholarly literature on trust, where it comes from remains an open question, as does the relationship between social and political trust. Some scholars argue that social trust is cultural, and that for any given individual it does not change after the formative years (Uslaner 2008b, 2018). A second perspective holds that social trust is shaped by experiences throughout the life course, particularly interactions with public officials and institutions (e.g., Kumlin and Rothstein 2005; Rothstein and Stolle 2008). According to the first perspective, trusting populations foster better quality institutions, whereas the latter suggests that social trust reflects the quality of public institutions (i.e., their fairness, impartiality, and freedom from corruption) (see Dinesen and Sønderskov 2021).

Prior studies have contributed to this debate using a variety of empirical approaches, but as Liu and Stolle (2017) noted, most have relied “on cross-sectional, observational data that are poorly suited to isolating causal effects” (p. 349). For example, many studies of trust use analyses of single waves of data from international surveys. Others have assessed possible causal relationships using lab or survey experiments or instrumental variables (Martin et al. 2020; 1126879 SRD X 10.1177/23780231221126879 SAGE).
Rothstein and Eek 2009; Tao et al. 2014). However, such studies have used samples with questionable representativeness and/or considered only highly stylized experimental contexts. No study with high internal and external validity has provided evidence of a causal relationship using panel data capturing individuals’ experiences with real public institutions.

In this article, we analyze change over time in a high-quality, nationally representative sample of panel survey respondents. Specifically, we use data from three waves of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), China’s first large-scale longitudinal survey project (see Xie and Hu 2014). We investigate how respondents’ trust changes from one survey wave to the next, an interval of about two years, comparing individuals who say they have been treated unfairly by government officials with those who do not report such treatment. Although the meaning different respondents attach to the question about “unfair treatment” is uncertain, we show that many are likely taking it to mean they have been victims of corruption. We find that people report less social and political trust if they say they have experienced unfair treatment since the last wave of the survey. These results suggest trust is therefore experiential throughout the life course, and is affected by the quality of individuals’ interactions with public institutions. We also find, however, that the effects of unfair treatment are short lived, with trust quickly reverting most of the way back to prior levels. Our results therefore provide partial support for both the cultural and institutional perspectives, and suggest how to reconcile them: trust responds to experiences with institutions, but not over the longer term.

Our analytical approach, of using panel data on individuals to study changes in their levels of trust over time, cannot rule out definitively that any longitudinal correlations are spurious, because of omitted and unobserved time-varying variables. Nevertheless, unlike cross-sectional analyses, panel data can be the basis for more confident causal inferences (Imai and Kim 2019). The use of panel data also has the advantage of allowing us to test whether any effects are temporary or lasting. As we explain below, we compare individuals not previously reporting experiences of unfair treatment both to themselves before exposure, and to otherwise similar individuals who are not exposed, using random-effects within-and-between (REWB) models (Bell, Fairbrother, and Jones 2019). Such models take advantage of the mean centering at the heart of fixed-effects models but without some limitations of the latter.

Background and Prior Research

Trust is a belief on the part of some actor A that another actor B could, but will not, intentionally engage in actions injurious to A, even in the absence of continual monitoring (e.g., Ermisch and Gambetta 2016). Trust depends on beliefs about another party’s trustworthiness—ability, benevolence, and integrity—and entails an acceptance of some vulnerability (Hamm, Smidt, and Mayer 2019; Rousseau et al. 1998). Social trust refers to a belief in the trustworthiness of generalized others (Newton and Zmerli 2011). Political or institutional trust refers to beliefs about the trustworthiness of public agencies and officials (Van der Meer and Zmerli 2017). Political trust is not necessarily desirable (evidenced by the fact it is higher in nondemocracies), but insofar as it reflects justified beliefs about state actors’ integrity and competence it tends to be associated with more positive outcomes (Norris 2022).

In this section, we briefly review the cultural perspective on trust, then at more length the institutional theory, including prior evidence for each.

The Cultural Perspective on Trust

One influential perspective in the study of social trust is most closely associated with the work of Eric Uslaner. Building on de Tocqueville, Almond and Verba, and Putnam, Uslaner (2008b) argued that social trust is a “value that we learn early in life and that is largely resistant to bad experiences—or good ones” (p. 290). His view is that social trust is culturally rooted, based particularly on levels of inequality in society, with members of more stratified societies less likely to identify with each other and feel a commonality of interest (Uslaner and Brown 2005). Higher trust societies, in turn, produce more trustworthy public officials, and citizens who are more able and willing to take actions that foster high-quality state institutions. Social trust therefore influences institutions’ quality, with corruption tending to emerge in contexts of low trust (Uslaner 2008b:293). Conversely, according to Uslaner (e.g., Uslaner 2005), social trust is unaffected by the quality of the institutions and the prevalence of corruption in society. From this perspective, there can be little relationship between social and political trust, as the former does not change much over the course of individuals’ lives, whereas the latter fluctuates according to governments’ performance, for example in managing the economy (Uslaner 2018:4; Van der Meer 2017).

In support of the cultural perspective, some empirical studies have found that trust indeed changes little after one’s formative years, and does not respond to some important experiences (e.g., Bauer 2015). Other studies have also confirmed that, even if average levels of social trust and trust or confidence in government and public institutions correlate strongly across nations, for a given individual political trust and social trust are not necessarily strongly related (e.g., Choi and Woo 2016; Newton and Norris 2000). That might be because, as much of the literature emphasizes, political trust responds to government performance, as captured by macroeconomic conditions, such as the national unemployment rate (Van der Meer 2017). If time-varying socioeconomic conditions are what shape political trust, whereas social trust is fixed after the formative years, then these variables cannot correlate very strongly.
The Institutional Perspective on Trust

A second theory of social trust is that it reflects people’s direct experiences with public institutions, and, specifically, whether those institutions are fair, impartial, and efficient (Rothstein and Stolle 2008; You 2018). In this view, governments play an important role in the “making and breaking” of trust, as the quality of public institutions signals and shapes people’s moral expectations and standards. In societies in which government institutions and bureaucrats (e.g., police officers, service providers, judges, city planners, teachers, doctors) exhibit procedural fairness and impartiality, people tend to trust other people; they learn that untrustworthy behaviors will be sanctioned and punished. If in contrast agents of the state act in unfair or partial ways, people will lose confidence in the fairness of society and the trustworthiness of other people generally (Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017). As Kumlin and Rothstein (2005) put it,

People may draw inferences about others’ trustworthiness from how they perceive public-service bureaucrats. If social workers, local policemen, public-health workers, and so on act in such a way that they cannot be trusted, why should people in general be trusted? (p. 349)

The extreme case is corruption, “the abuse of an entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International n.d.). Corruption can occur at the level of elites, as in cases of influence peddling, or the level of everyday life, such as when people seek services from low- and mid-level public employees of agencies like health clinics, schools, police departments, and permit offices. Entrusted powers are meant to be applied according to rules that are impartial, determined without specific cases in mind, and corruption is therefore inherently unfair (Uslaner 2008a; You 2018).1 And some evidence suggests that perceptions of unfair treatment shape trust (Marien and Werner 2019). As Grimes (2017) noted, however, a “linkage [between fairness and political trust] remains more of a theoretically compelling argument than a causal relation substantiated by empirical observation” (p. 260).

Consistent with the general theory that trust responds to experiences, Paxton and Glanville (2015) found that it can be manipulated in lab experiments. Similarly, some panel studies suggest that trust responds to negative events like illness or job loss (Laurence 2015).2 Focusing more specifically on institutional quality, populations in areas with more corruption scandals tend to have lower levels of social and/or political trust (Ares and Hernández 2017; Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro 2018). And using lab experiments with students, Rothstein and Eek (2009) found that experimental manipulations of people’s perceptions of the prevalence of corruption (i.e., vignettes of doctors or police officers taking bribes) influence self-reported social trust.

Other studies have used data on migrants and tested whether trust responds to the quality of institutions in immigrants’ receiving countries, or remains fixed according to the quality of the institutions in their countries of origin. Dinesen (2012, 2013) and Nannestad et al. (2014) found that the quality of the institutions in receiving countries influence social trust much more than the culture of the countries from which migrants came. Bergh and Öhrvall (2018) reported that Swedish expatriates’ levels of social trust adjust over time to countries’ institutional quality. This was true, however, only for respondents younger than 30 years, consistent with the theory that social trust is only responsive to experiences during the formative years.

The institutional theory of trust suggests that direct interactions with public officials and institutions may affect people’s social trust insofar as those interactions first shape political and institutional trust, and political and institutional trust then influences social trust. As Rothstein (2013) put it, having had experiences that lead them to believe “public officials [are] corrupt, partial, or untrustworthy, citizens . . . will make an inference that most other people cannot be trusted either” (p. 1020). Empirically, studies from a diversity of contexts have shown that changes in individuals’ political and institutional trust correlate with subsequent changes in social trust (Kim and Kim 2021; Mewes et al. 2021; Seifert 2018; Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016). Evidence that people’s social or political trust responds to direct experiences with state institutions and government officials is, however, still lacking. It is also possible that the effects of such experiences on social trust are not mediated by political or institutional trust. By analyzing whether the experience of (perceived) unfair treatment by government officials contributes to changes in people’s political and social trust, we thus test an underresearched mechanism within the institutional theory of trust.

Before we turn to the description of our data and methods we first situate our empirical case (China) in the more general Western-dominated literature of trust.

The Case of China

China presents an important case for trust scholars, representing as it does a cultural, political, and economic departure from the high-income Western democracies most often considered in the trust literature. But although China’s distinctiveness, size, and global influence make it a valuable context in which to study this issue, it also presents a
challenge. China is a high-trust society, judging by responses to the “standard question” that surveys most often use for measuring social trust: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?” This apparently high level of trust, however, reflects that the “radius of trust” in China is unusually narrow (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011). That is, when survey respondents in China report their trust in “most people,” they tend to think about people they already know. Fortunately, the data we use allow us to assess the impact of unfair treatment not just on responses to the standard trust question, but also to a question about trust in strangers (“people you meet for the first time”). This survey item is arguably a better measure of generalized social trust in China (see Steinhardt 2012).

Social trust is unusually high in China (Steinhardt 2012), and political trust also, albeit only in the national rather than local level of government (Wu and Wilkes 2018). For social trust, as explained earlier, Chinese survey respondents interpret the standard question’s reference to “most people” more narrowly than others (Delhey et al. 2011). Even allowing that caveat, it is surprising how high trust is in China, given the continuing prevalence of corruption, if indeed corruption depresses trust. Arguably, Chinese people’s low trust in strangers and high trust in their in-groups helps explain the widespread corruption (Uslaner 2008a). China’s heavily bureaucratic state provides abundant opportunities and incentives for yiquan mousi (privilege seeking) (Harding 2014). Given ongoing concerns about corruption, China’s leaders have sometimes campaigned aggressively against it. In Xi Jinping’s inaugural speech as general secretary in 2012, he emphasized corruption as a threat to the very survival of the Community Party and vowed to crack down on both “tigers and flies”: corrupt high-ranking officials and corrupt lower level civil servants (Yuen 2014).

Summary

Given the above, the present study has two major purposes. First, more specifically, to test whether social and political trust respond to the quality of individuals’ interactions with public officials. The institutional perspective says they do, with political trust mediating the effect of social trust. The cultural perspective, in contrast, claims social trust is unaffected by such interactions. Second, more generally, our analysis tests what social trust is: a cultural disposition learned early in life which changes little thereafter, or a continually updated assessment of a society that reflects experiences throughout the life course.

Our analysis builds on a previous study, by Wu and Xie (2014), which used data from the 2012 wave of the CFPS and found a cross-sectional correlation between people’s reports of unfair treatment and lower trust. We also build on Sun and Wang’s (2012) finding that individuals who perceive higher levels of corruption on the part of government officials in China are less trusting; Jiang and Zhang (2021) reported a similar pattern for 14 Asian countries, including China, as a whole. In our study, we use a variable capturing such perceptions and another based on people’s (self-reported) direct experiences of institutional unfairness, reported over three waves. Although the latter is not a focused measure of corruption, this combination of variables allows us to engage a variety of arguments in the literature about the consequences of both corruption specifically and public officials’ partiality and/or unfairness more generally.

Data and Methods

We investigate changes over time in respondents’ levels of trust as functions of (self-reported) experiences of unfair treatment. Our empirical test is stringent, as measurement error tends to lead to conservative coefficient estimates in within-individual analyses using panel data (Collischon and Eberl 2020). The analysis we present is therefore conservative. We examine whether different types of trust respond to (self-reports of) unfair treatment and whether political trust mediates the relationship between such treatment and social trust.

Data and Sample

We use the 2012, 2014, and 2016 waves of the CFPS, which was funded by the 985 Program and carried out by the Institution of Social Science Survey of Peking University. The first wave of the panel study was 2010, but that wave did not include questions about trust. CFPS respondents were interviewed face to face, and were drawn from almost all regions (Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan were excluded), making the sample representative of 95 percent of the Chinese total population. The CFPS sample is large, with 35,719 respondents in 2012, 37,147 in 2014, and 36,892 in 2016. Of the 47,444 individuals total who appear in the data across these three waves, 10,138 people responded to one wave, 12,298 responded to two waves, and 25,008 responded to all three waves. The individual response rate for the inaugural or baseline 2010 survey was 84.1 percent, and the reinterview rate for 2012 was 80.6 percent, with a cross-sectional response rate of 74.1 percent (Xie and Hu 2014). Response rates for subsequent years were similar.

Variables

We focus on three outcomes: social trust, trust in strangers, and trust in government officials. As explained above, the “radius of trust” in China is narrow, such that the standard question about trust is more of a measure of particularized rather than social trust. A question about trust in people the respondent is meeting for the first time is more useful for measuring attitudes toward generalized others.
Translated into English, the social trust question is “In general, do you think that most people are trustworthy, or is it better to take greater caution when getting along with other people?” The two response options were “Most people are trustworthy” and “The greater caution, the better.” The question about strangers is “How much do you trust people you meet for the first time?” The question about officials is “How much do you trust cadres?” Cadres (ganbu) are government officials. For the latter two questions, the response options ranged from 0 (“very distrustful”) to 10 (“very trustworthy”).

The key independent variable in our study is whether respondents report having been treated unfairly by government officials. The CFPS asked respondents, “In the past year, did you have any of the following experiences?” and listed a number of experiences they may or may not have had. One was “unfair treatment by government officials,” and respondents could simply answer yes or no. Although across all three waves, more than three quarters of respondents included in all waves never reported unfair treatment, in each wave, about one tenth of respondents report having been treated unfairly.

As explained above, respondents may have interpreted this question to be about instances of corruption, in which an official for example demanded a bribe in return for some public service. To assess this possibility, we test the correlation between answers to the question about unfair treatment and a question about how much of a problem the respondent perceives corruption to be in China. If people’s beliefs about the prevalence of corruption change as a response to self-reports of unfair treatment, then respondents were probably thinking about their own direct experiences of corruption, and updating their beliefs accordingly. The corruption question is “How would you rate the severity of the government corruption in China?” The response options are 0 (“not severe”) to 10 (“extremely severe”). (A note instructed interviewers to record a 0 if respondents said that there was no corruption problem in China.) As a second check on how people respond to unfair treatment, we investigate whether respondents’ assessments of their local government’s performance change in response to it. We use responses, on a five-point scale, to a question about the respondent’s assessment of the performance of their county or district government in the last year (good, some, not much, no, worse). Higher scores indicate better performance.

We enter a number of demographic variables as controls: age in years, gender, urban versus rural residence, income, marital status, employment status, and education. Income is the log of total family income (including wages, business income, property income, and transfer income) divided by the number of family members living together. Marital status is entered as a binary variable for having any status other than never married. Employment status is also treated as binary (employed vs. any other status). Education is entered on a scale ranging from 1 to 8 (in order: illiterate/semiliterate, primary school, junior high school, senior high school, three-year college, four-year college, master’s degree, and doctoral degree).

The CFPS includes an indicator variable for whether anyone other than the interviewer and respondent were present for the interview. We check whether it makes a difference to exclude respondents who were not alone for the interview.

Table A1 in the Online Appendix presents descriptive statistics. The missingness reflects that only 25,008 respondents appeared in all three waves. We deleted observations with missing data, but not observations for individuals with missing data in other waves. The missingness of either the trust or unfair treatment variables does not correlate in subsequent waves with higher or lower values of either variable in previous waves, suggesting that panel attrition is not due to the disproportionate dropout of distrusters. We also tried running the analysis only on individuals observed in all three waves, and although doing so reduced the number of observations by about half, the results were substantively unchanged.

**Methods**

The core of our analysis is to test whether respondents’ self-reports of unfair treatment by government officials correlate with changes in their trust. Do respondents reporting unfair treatment exhibit different changes in trust compared with otherwise similar individuals not reporting unfair treatment? We also assess the degree to which political trust mediates any relationship between unfair treatment and social trust, using the percentage reduction in the size of the coefficient on unfair treatment in models of social trust controlling or not controlling for political trust.

Investigating relationships “within” given individuals over time, our goal is to control both for differences between individual and for a given individual’s past experiences of unfair treatment and past levels of trust. To do this, we rely on REWB models (see Bell et al. 2019). These models rely on the logic of the mean centering at the heart of fixed-effects models, partitioning the relationship between two time-varying variables into cross-sectional (between) and longitudinal (within) components. They do so using the same mathematical function as fixed-effects models: the centering of time-varying variables by their means for each separate individual in a panel data set. The within-individual results from REWB models are therefore identical to the coefficients estimated in fixed-effects models, but unlike the latter models, REWB models also report coefficients for between-individual/cross-sectional relationships. These latter coefficients capture whether individuals with higher levels of $X$ (averaging across all observations) tend to have higher/lower levels of $Y$.

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3In total, 4,560 respondents were observed in 2012 and 2014 but not 2016, 5,075 were observed in 2014 and 2016 but not 2012, and 2,663 respondents were observed in 2012 and 2016 but not 2014. Individuals observed numbered 3,488, 2,504, and 4,146, respectively, 2012, 2014, and 2016 only.
Given the distribution of the answers to the binary question about social trust, we fit linear probability models rather than logits or probits. Linear probability models have the advantage of being more readily interpretable, and present no major disadvantages when the modeled probabilities are not close to 0 or 1 (Hellevik 2009).

REWБ models have the merit of controlling for any time-constant variables, even if they are not observed. Nevertheless, such models require some assumptions to be met (Imai and Kim 2019). First, they assume no time-varying confounders, including potentially unobserved ones, and that treatment is randomly assigned, at least conditional on variables in the model. Second, finding a correlation between change in $x$ and change in $y$ does not say anything about causal ordering; which variable leads to which. As regards our analysis here, we cannot rule out that an exogenous change in trust immediately changes some respondents’ probabilities of experiencing or perceiving unfair treatment. We cannot see any reason to think our analysis is severely affected by the violation of either of these assumptions, but we also cannot be certain that both assumptions hold. To investigate whether distrust may lead to unfair treatment (rather than the reverse), we investigated whether individuals reporting a decline in trust between 2012 and 2014 were more likely to report unfair treatment by 2016.4 Among individuals reporting a decline in (binary) social trust, 11.5 percent reported unfair treatment, as opposed to 11.6 percent of others. The difference is thus very small, and if anything declining trust was associated with a lower subsequent probability of reporting unfair treatment. These percentages were the same for changes in trust in strangers. For trust in officials, the corresponding percentages were 12.6 percent and 11.0 percent. There is thus some reason for thinking that declining political trust may lead to unfair treatment, real or perceived, but not social trust. Individuals with less social trust are not more likely to experience unfair treatment, or perceive that treatment is unfair, compared with more trusting individuals.

In addition to REWB models, we also use change score models, as known as first-differences models. Change score models, like fixed-effects and REWB models, control for any time-invariant confounding variables. For panel data analyses with only two waves, change score/first differences are in fact equivalent to fixed-effects models, in that they effectively remove the mean of $Y$ and each $X$ variable, by individual. We also check whether the effects of unfair treatment are weaker for older respondents, on the logic that trust may grow less malleable generally over the life course, as previously found for example by Bergh and Öhrvall (2018). This pattern would point to the importance of the formative years.

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4We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

Results

Consistent with prior research, we see in the CFPS data that social trust in China is high: 54 percent, 54 percent, and 56 percent of respondents said they trusted most people in 2012, 2014, and 2016, respectively. This reflects the very narrow radius of trust in China, which we can see by comparing the answers to the question about trusting strangers, or “people you meet for the first time.” The latter question is measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, but fully half the respondents answer either 0 or 1, and the overall mean response is about 2 (2.19 in 2012, 1.96 in 2014, and 2.05 in 2016). For the third outcome, trust in public officials, the mean (on a scale ranging from 0 to 10) was somewhat higher: 4.88 in 2012, 5.00 in 2014, and 4.96 in 2016.

The three trust variables are not strongly correlated within individuals. Pooling across the three waves, the correlation between trust in strangers (measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 10) and either social trust (binary) or trust in officials (0 to 10) is 0.21, while the correlation between social trust and trust in officials is only 0.15. The correlations within individuals across waves, for each type of trust, are also not strong. For social trust, the correlation from one wave to the next is 0.25, for trust in strangers it is 0.29, and for trust in officials 0.35.

Figure 1 plots the mean social trust in each of the three waves, for four groups defined by when (if ever) they first experience unfair treatment, allowing us to compare the trust trends for individuals who experience unfair treatment for the first time in different periods. The green group includes people who first reported unfair treatment in the year prior to 2014 and the yellow group in the year prior to 2016. (Recall that the question asks about unfair treatment in the past year, and thus, for the latter two survey waves, since the previous wave.) Both groups report lower levels of trust just when they first report unfair treatment. By contrast, for all four groups, in times when they do not report unfair treatment, trust is increasing or at least stable. That trust decreases between 2012 and 2014 for individuals who experience unfair treatment in this same period, whereas it increases for individuals who do not experience such treatment for the first time until later, suggests that the timing of such experiences is as if random.

Figure 1 also shows that in the first survey wave after unfair treatment, people report lower trust, but after that the effect of the treatment appears to wear off; by the time of the next wave, trust rises. So unfair treatment effects an immediate but short-lived change but does not appear to put people on a long-term downward trend or permanently alter their trust. By 2016 the trust of the group who first report unfair treatment in 2014 (shown in green) does not, however, return all the way back to where it was in 2012. If we compare the social trust in 2016 of individuals reporting multiple instances of unfair treatment by that year, we find a linear dose-response relationship: 58.7 percent of individuals who never
report unfair treatment are trusting; 49.2 percent of those reporting unfair treatment once (in 2012, 2014, or 2016) are trusting; 43.2 percent of those who report unfair treatment in two waves; and 35.5 percent of those who report unfair treatment three times. The effects therefore appear to cumulate. (Henceforth, we rescale the binary social trust variable from 0/1 to 0/10, for comparability with the other two trust variables.)

Similar to Figure 1, Table A2 in the Online Appendix presents the percentage of respondents who say most people can be trusted, broken down by survey year, and by whether respondents reported being treated unfairly in the past year. In all three years, respondents who said they had been treated unfairly were less likely to say people can be trusted, the gap holding both for respondents who were trusting in the previous wave and those who were not trusting. Table A2 therefore also provides evidence that unfair treatment reduces social trust.

Next, Figure 2 similarly plots trust in government officials, at three time points, for groups of individuals distinguished by when they first (if ever) report unfair treatment. Again we see that trust declines specifically at times when individuals say they have been treated unfairly, whereas among individuals who do not report unfair treatment trust tends not to decline, or even rise, especially if it has previously declined. Like in Figure 1, for the group who first report unfair treatment in 2014 (in green), trust does not fully recover in 2016. The two figures, then, provide strong visual evidence of an effect of unfair treatment on trust.

Next, in Table 1, we present our core results: fitted multivariate models of three forms of trust, comparing observations both to those from the same individual at different times (within relationship) and to those from other individuals (between). For each outcome, we present a null model, a model with only the coefficient estimates for unfair treatment, and a full model with a wide range of controls. Time-varying controls are also mean centered, to capture both within- and between-individual relationships. We first discuss the null model for each of the three outcomes, then models with predictors. One model for each outcome includes only core predictors, and the other those predictors plus all control variables. The table groups coefficient estimates by whether they are within (longitudinal) or between (cross-sectional).
We can see from the three null models (the first model for each outcome), and comparing the random-effects variances at the individual and residual levels, that 24 percent of the total variance in social trust is across individuals \((5.92/[5.92 + 18.92])\), 28 percent for trust in strangers, and 34 percent for trust in officials. The remainder is within-individual variation. Each form of trust is therefore somewhat stable for a given individual over time, but there is also substantial change from one wave to the next.

Turning to the second and third models for each outcome, we see only two consistent predictors of changes over time (within-individual variation) in trust. One is education (appearing in model 2 for each outcome), increasing levels of which are positively correlated with change in trust. The other is the experience of unfair treatment by government officials, without controls (model 1) or with them (model 2). We have therefore found evidence that trust changes depending on experiences of unfair treatment by bureaucrats.

Comparing across individuals (between relationships), unfair treatment is also correlated with lower trust of all three kinds. Having any marital status other than never-married is associated with lower trust, although being older and being employed are associated with higher trust. The relationship with education is inconsistent across types of trust. These between-individual relationships are likely more subject to omitted-variable bias, but the fact that the between- and within-individual relationships between unfair treatment and each trust outcome are similar is further indicative of a causal relationship.

Comparing the effect sizes, across the three outcomes (social trust having been rescaled to 0/10, making it comparable with the two 0-to-10 scales), unfair treatment by government officials has more impact on social trust and trust in officials, rather than trust in strangers. For no outcomes, judging by the very small reductions in residual variance, do the predictor variables explain a great deal of the variation in the outcome. The individual-level predictors do somewhat better (reducing the individual-level variance for trust in officials by about one fifth, for example).

As explained earlier, we also estimated first-differences models. Like the REWB models, these control for changes over time in individuals’ age, income, education, whether
Table 1. Linear Multilevel Models of Three Types of Trust, as Functions of Variables Entered as Individual Means (Between) and Differences from Those Means (Within).

|                | Social Trust (0–10) | Trust in Strangers (0–10) | Trust in Officials (0–10) |
|----------------|---------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
|                | 0       | 1       | 2       | 0       | 1       | 2       | 0       | 1       | 2       |
| **Within**     |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Unfair         | −.50*** (.08) | −.50*** (.08) | −.13*** (.03) | −.10*** (.03) | −.73*** (.04) | −.75*** (.04) |
| Education      | .64*** (.15)  | .44*** (.06)   | −.13*** (.04) | −.20*** (.04) | −.47*** (.03) | −.47*** (.04) |
| **Between**    |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Unfair         | −1.78*** (.08) | −1.66*** (.08) | −.24*** (.04) | −.20*** (.04) | −1.87*** (.04) | −1.98*** (.04) |
| Employed       | .14* (.06)   | .15** (.00)   | −.14*** (.00) | −.13*** (.01) | −.04*** (.00) | −.04*** (.01) |
| Non-sing       | −.24*** (.08) | −.38*** (.03) | −.38*** (.03) | −.38*** (.03) | −.38*** (.03) | −.38*** (.03) |
| Education      | .47*** (.02)  | −.04** (.01)   | .13*** (.01)   | .13*** (.01)   | .13*** (.01)   | .13*** (.01)   |
| Age            | .02** (.00)   | .00*** (.00)   | .00*** (.00)   | .00*** (.00)   | .00*** (.00)   | .00*** (.00)   |
| **Random effects** |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Individual     | 5.92     | 5.74     | 5.34     | 1.26     | 1.26     | 1.17     | 2.32     | 2.12     | 1.84     |
| Residual       | 18.92    | 18.90    | 18.88    | 3.21     | 3.20     | 3.18     | 4.46     | 4.43     | 4.42     |
| n (observations; individuals) | 80,879; 39,016 | 80,765; 39,008 | 80,742; 38,976 |

*Note: Non-sing = Non-single. Values in parentheses are standard errors. Results for control variables appear in Table A3 in the Online Appendix. Social trust has been rescaled from 0–10 for comparability.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
they are in employment (vs. any other status), and whether they have any marital status other than single or never married. The results from these models appear in Table A4 in the Online Appendix. Here we investigate changes across single waves (2014 vs. 2012 and 2016 vs. 2014), again for each of the three kinds of trust. The results are broadly consistent, with reports of unfair treatment being associated with declines in each form of trust. That said, the association between unfair treatment and declining trust in strangers is statistically significant for 2016 compared with 2014 but not 2014 compared with 2012. This coefficient is not significant even in an unconditional model without any controls.

With the first-differences models, we also ran models limited to individuals with no prior experience of unfair treatment (the third and fourth models for each of the three outcomes). These models offer the most controlled comparison of otherwise similar individuals who do versus do not experience unfair treatment. REWB models and their within-individual results compare individuals to themselves at different times, whenever they experienced unfair treatment, whereas these latter first-differences models only consider people who experienced unfair treatment after previously not experiencing it. The results are similar, though, if anything, the effect sizes for these models are larger. We also estimated the analysis for social trust separately for people who reported being either trusting or not trusting in the most recent wave, and the coefficient on (first-differenced) unfair treatment remained significant in all cases.

Table 2 presents a test of the degree to which political trust (trust in officials) mediates the effect of unfair treatment on social trust, and the results of similar models as in Table 1, but here for two other outcomes: perceptions of the prevalence of the problem of corruption in China (on a scale ranging from 0 to 10), and perceptions of government performance (0–4). Comparing the first model in Table 2, of social trust, to the third model of social trust in Table 1, we can see some evidence of mediation, though not a great deal. The size of the coefficient on unfair treatment has shrunk by 28 percent for the within-individual relationship, and 42 percent between individuals. This result is consistent with the institutional theory’s expectation that interactions with public officials shapes public trust in them, and trust in officials in turn shapes trust in generalized others.

The final four models in Table 2 show that, with or without controls, perceptions of the prevalence of corruption in China and of the regional government’s performance tend to deteriorate among respondents who report unfair treatment, unlike respondents who do not. These results suggest that many respondents who reported unfair treatment were indicating they have been victims of corruption. It is not possible to know for sure that this is in fact the case; perhaps bitter feelings about an experience that was unfair but not corrupt led many respondents to perceive more prevalent corruption and poorer government performance. But it seems likely that at least a significant number of respondents were signaling a direct experience of public sector corruption. If so, the relationships we found between unfair treatment and depressed trust are consistent with institutional theory’s expectations about the consequences of direct experiences with low-quality public institutions characterized by high levels of corruption.

We now turn to the potential role of age as a moderator. We find clear evidence that the relationship between unfair treatment and (lower) trust is stronger for younger respondents. The relationship is about one half to two thirds as strong for those above the median age as for individuals below the median age. For trust in strangers, among respondents above median age the effect of unfair treatment is weaker, to the point it is not statistically significant. If we allow for an interaction, the modeled effect of unfair treatment declines with age, reaching zero at about 76 years of age.

### Table 2. Linear Multilevel Models of Social Trust (Controlling for Trust in Officials), the Perceived Prevalence of Corruption, and Perceptions of Government Performance.

|                      | Social Trust (0/10) | Corruption Prevalence (0–10) | Government Performance (0–4) |
|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                      | 1                   | 1                           | 1                           |
| Within               |                      |                             |                             |
| Unfair               | -.36** (.08)        | .63** (.05)                 | -.22** (.01)                |
| Trust officials      | .19** (.01)         |                             |                             |
| Between              | -.96** (.08)        | 1.32** (.05)                | -.51** (.01)                |
| Unfair               |                      |                             |                             |
| Trust officials      | .35** (.01)         |                             |                             |
| Random-effects       |                      |                             |                             |
| variances            | 4.94                | 1.48                        | .18                         |
| Individual           | 18.71               | 6.56                        | .61                         |
| Residual             | 1.28                | 6.18                        | .61                         |
| n (observations; individuals) | 80,524; 38,934 | 78,482; 38,566               | 78,267; 38,488               |

*Note:* Values in parentheses are standard errors. Results for control variables appear in Table A5 in the Online Appendix. **p < .01.
age, compared with about –0.1 at age 20. Younger people are therefore more affected by unfair treatment.\(^5\)

As robustness checks for our main results, first we tried excluding respondents who were surveyed with anyone else present (other than the interviewer). Doing so made no substantive difference to our results. Second, we tried fitting models with random effects (both intercepts and slopes for unfair treatment), for the 31 different provinces and regions in which respondents reside. Again, our substantive results were unchanged. For all three types of trust, the slope for (mean-centered) unfair treatment in every one of the 31 provinces and regions was negative. Third, given the severely skewed distribution of the responses to the question about trust in strangers, we tried making this variable dichotomous, and fitting either linear probability models or logistic regression models. If we divided respondents into those who gave a response of 2 or higher versus those who answered 0 or 1, and we included a full set of controls, we found the coefficient on (mean-centered) unfair treatment is no longer statistically significant at the .05 level. However, making the outcome dichotomous in other ways, or without a full set of controls, the result remained significant.\(^6\)

Finally, we also tried applying a weighted linear fixed-effects, propensity score–based approach to panel data, recently developed by Imai and Kim (2019) and made available as the R package wfe. The package estimates propensity scores in a Bayesian framework, using background demographic variables as predictors. This approach yielded very similar (within-individual) results to those we obtained using the REWB models presented earlier. For example, the average effects of unfair treatment on social trust and trust in strangers were estimated to be –0.05 and –0.13, respectively, with \(p\) values in both cases <.01.

**Conclusion**

The institutional theory of trust suggests that experiences with public institutions and officials influence people’s political and social trust. Potentially social trust responds to changes in political trust, and changes in political trust are driven by people’s experiences with the state. Alternatively, interactions with government officials and institutions may shape social trust directly, not via the mechanism of political and institutional trust. Previous longitudinal studies have provided evidence that changes in individuals’ political and institutional trust correlate with subsequent changes in social trust. But there has been little to no investigation of whether interactions with public officials and institutions perceived as unfair shape either social or political and institutional trust. Using nationally representative panel data from China, we have presented evidence that experiences with government officials and institutions perceived as unfair shape people’s political and social trust. Our study is thus among the first to present longitudinal support for the institutional perspective outlined by Rothstein and Stolle (2008) and others.

That trust responds to experiences runs contrary to the strong version of the cultural perspective, in which individuals’ social trust does not change—and thus cannot reflect experiences of any kind—beyond the formative years. On the other hand, the results we have presented are consistent with a looser version of the cultural theory, in which social trust stays fairly constant after an individual’s formative years—but may respond, temporarily, to some experiences. We have found that an experience of unfair treatment results in a decrease in trust, but as is clear from Figures 1 and 2, the effects of such an experience mostly do not last. Potentially a single such experience has some permanent impact, but most of the effect does not endure over time.

We also found that negative interactions with public officials have weaker effects on the trust of older respondents, a result consistent with Bergh and Öhrvall (2018). This pattern, and the finding that the effects of unfair treatment are mostly short lived, together point to a reconciliation of the cultural and institutional perspectives. Experiences of unfair treatment by public officials do appear to matter, but more so during an individual’s formative years, while after that time their effects are weaker. Social trust may be susceptible only to transitory fluctuations around a baseline set point. Political trust also appears to revert to its prior baseline, though our study cannot capture that changes may be due to fluctuating socioeconomic conditions.

An alternative reason why experiences of unfairness have weaker impacts on older individuals is that they may see and evaluate the public sector differently. Specifically, older people in China might be less troubled by corruption than younger people.\(^7\) Chinese political culture has long provided for a unique relationship between individuals and the state. People in China largely conceive of the individual-state relationship as hierarchical and are willing to sacrifice personal interests for social harmony. Their orientation toward power and authority has led to a generally high level of political trust even though the Chinese government fails to respond to their personal demands (Shi 2001; Wu and Wilkes 2018).

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\(^5\) We also tried interacting the indicator variable for unfair treatment with (background) education, as there is some prior evidence from cross-national survey research of an interaction effect between corruption and education (Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017:179). Moreover, contrary to other contexts, existing research suggests that more highly educated Chinese are less trusting, both in generalized others and in political institutions (Wu and Wilkes 2018; Wu and Shi 2020). We did not however find an interaction term between level of education and the (mean-differenced) indicator for unfair treatment was significant (for any outcome) in REWB models.

\(^6\) Logistic models for social trust returned no substantively different results compared with linear probability models.

\(^7\) We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.
However, the modernization of Chinese political culture in recent decades has led to the rise of critical citizens who are acquiring stronger liberal democratic values and are more critical toward government institutions (Wang and You 2016). This is especially true among younger generations who are often better educated than their parents and grandparents (Wu and Shi 2020). Younger respondents’ higher exposure to a new political culture may mean they are becoming increasingly critical toward the government and less likely to see individuals and the state as hierarchical. These changing citizen expectations may explain why unfair treatment from the government makes a bigger impression on younger individuals. Older generations may be less likely to think their government has an obligation to meet their requests and demands, such that actual government performance and behavior, including corruption, may have less impact on them (Shi 2001:403).

Our study has a number of weaknesses. Empirically, our study is limited by the reliance on self-reports. We also cannot know precisely how many respondents interpreted the “unfair treatment” question to be referring to corruption, as opposed to something else. And we cannot completely rule out that some respondents whose trust was going to decline anyway (for unrelated reasons) were more likely to experience unfair treatment or to perceive interactions as unfair. There is likely some degree of subjectivity at work. We also have no clear explanation for why respondents who experienced unfair treatment in any one wave are less trusting in all waves (see Figures 1 and 2).

Nevertheless, aside from going some way in reconciling the cultural and institutional theories of social trust, they may help explain the puzzle of political trust in China. Perhaps uniquely, trust in the central government in China exceeds that in local and regional governments. The reason may be that interactions with corrupt low-level officials drive down political trust, while the country’s strong economic performance in recent decades has fostered high trust in the central government.

Future replications of our analysis in other countries would be useful, particularly given the uniqueness of the Chinese case. It would be valuable to use some form of panel data analyses to test whether prior levels of trust influence whether individuals engage in corruption, including corrupt practices of net benefit to themselves. And more panel data studies of whether, and perhaps how fully and how quickly, different kinds of trust revert to their original levels after temporarily responding to different sorts of experiences would also be constructive.

**Availability of Data and Material**

All CFPS data are available from Peking University at [https://open-data.pku.edu.cn/dataverse CFPS?language=en](https://open-data.pku.edu.cn/dataverse CFPS?language=en).

**Code Availability**

Full R code for replicating all analyses in this article is available as part of the online supplement.

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**Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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