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The Components of Stubborn Distrust

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If we want to understand a belief or an attitude, not much is achieved by merely describing it as irrational. Often it is useful to try to reconstruct the thinking that can lead to seemingly strange beliefs. Sometimes irrational beliefs can be understood as rational in a limited sense; for instance they may follow from certain premises that are for some reason taken for granted. Hugh Desmond’s article “Status Distrust of Scientific Experts” (2022) is, as I read it, an interesting attempt to reconstruct reasons and motives behind a particular kind of irrationality, which he calls *stubborn distrust*.

His focus is on stubborn distrust in experts. By this he means distrust that is resistant to evidence indicating that the experts can be trusted, such as evidence that their standpoints are correct or that they act in good will. But of course, stubborn distrust is a much more general concept. We can distrust others than experts stubbornly, and stubborn distrust can be an aggravating component in a wide range of social conflicts.

### **Status Distrust**

Desmond identifies a specific type of stubborn distrust, which he calls *status distrust*. By this he means that “a person’s claims are distrusted simply because of that person’s social status” (12). He defines status distrust as distrust by some low-status person, directed against a high-status person. “The logic of status distrust”, he says, “reflects the first-person perspective of the low-status individual: their vulnerability in the collective and uncertainty about the future” (9). However, I see no reason why status distrust must always go in that direction. Arguably, (downwards) distrust exhibited by high-status persons against those with low status may be an even more harmful social phenomenon than the (upwards) distrust that low-status persons direct against high-status persons.

Status distrust appears to be a significant factor in many cases of distrust in scientific experts. In other words, an expert’s high social status can be one of the reasons why some other persons distrust her. However, it does not seem plausible that a person’s high status is in general such a dominant factor that we can talk about “status distrust” as a stand-alone phenomenon. I propose that we should instead see status distrust as one of several components in distrust, in particular stubborn distrust of experts.

Indeed, high status does not appear to be a sufficient reason for someone to be distrusted. Movie stars and famous artists have high status, probably higher than physicians or climate scientists, but it does not seem to be common to systematically distrust them in the way that the latter two categories are distrusted. Therefore, Desmond seems to go too far when he says that “scientists (or high status individuals in general)” are distrusted “*merely* in virtue of the status they possess, or in other words in virtue of the social rank they are assigned in relation to others” (p. 10, emphasis added). Other factors than high social status seem to be required for (upwards) social distrust in experts to develop into stubborn distrust.

Notably, people with low or intermediate status can be distrusted in the same way as high status experts. Nurses are not high-status persons, but they experience the same type of distrust as physicians (Jasani et al. 2021; McKay et al. 2020). Furthermore, high status

persons can have the same type of stubborn distrust in experts as low-status persons. You only need to search the internet for “anti-vaxx celebrities” to find multiple examples of this.

## Two Additional Factors

It seems to me that at least two factors, in addition to status distrust, must be included in order to understand stubborn distrust in experts. One of these is the activities of “alternative experts”, who contradict the consensus among conventional experts but are often much more adept at gaining the confidence of people who are uncertain what to believe (Eslen-Ziya and Giorgi 2022). Often, the major message of “alternative experts” is that conventional experts cannot be trusted. Climate science denialism provides unusually clear examples of this (Hansson 2017; Fischer 2022).

The other factor is the development of conspiracy theories as integral components of ideologies that promote distrust in conventional expertise. If all vaccines are harmful to human health, why do medical experts on infectious diseases unanimously recommend vaccination as beneficial for health? This is almost impossible to explain without invoking some kind of conspiracy theory. Similarly, if creationism is true, why are researchers in biology in almost complete agreement on the reality of evolution? And if human activities have no effects on the climate, why are climate scientists unanimous in their insistence that anthropogenic climate change is real? Again, it seems necessary to resort to conspiracy theories to make the “alternative” worldview even minimally coherent.

In summary, status distrust can be an important component in stubborn distrust in experts, but there are also other components that we must understand in order to get the full picture.

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