

Social psychologist explains how authorities can regain survivors' trust after Grenfell Tower fire

September 4 2017, by Ken Rotenberg



Credit: garryknight/Flickr

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, survivors and their supporters [were outraged](#) about the perceived lack of care and compassion shown by government bodies, and the agencies which act on their behalf. Since then, UK authorities have [started criminal investigations](#), [intervened in the management](#) of social housing in the area and [launched several inquiries](#).

All these measures aim to address the suffering and destruction wrought by the blaze and prevent it from happening again. But it remains to be seen whether these measures are enough to restore residents' [trust](#) in these institutions.

Finding resolutions which address these grievances and restore trust in authority is important – and not only because it would help [survivors](#) of the blaze and their loved ones to rebuild their lives. All British citizens have a stake in the resolution of the Grenfell Tower blaze, as it is at the heart of British values that the country – and its [government](#) – are held to be fair and trustworthy.

Social psychology can offer some insights into how people generate "trust beliefs" – beliefs about who they should trust, which are shaped by their perceptions and interpretations of events such as the Grenfell Tower blaze. By understanding how those beliefs were affected by what happened at Grenfell, it is then be possible to find effective ways to rebuild trust.

Growing distrust

According to one social psychological approach – the Basis, Domain and Target trust framework (BDT) – citizens' trust beliefs in their elected representatives [are based on expectations that](#) they will act honestly, ensure citizens' personal information remains private and fulfil promises such as to protect the lives of citizens and maintain their welfare. The BDT also stresses that [there are strong tendencies](#) for trust to be reciprocated or vice versa. For example, one person's distrust in another increases the likelihood that he or she will be distrusted by that other person in turn.

After the fire, it was discovered that Grenfell Tower had been fitted with a cheaper, less fire-resistant cladding which did not meet fire regulations

– and that concerns about fire safety had not been addressed to the residents' satisfaction. So, it is not surprising that survivors of the Grenfell Tower blaze [seem to feel](#) that their trust had been violated because their representatives in local and national authorities failed to act honestly and fulfil their promises to keep citizens safe.

One survivor told The Independent: "If, instead of focusing on asset-stripping the community, they'd been doing what they were meant to be doing – keeping us safe – none of this would have happened."

The BDT framework suggests several likely outcomes of these violations of trust. Survivors may be very reluctant to depend on the agencies to fulfil their promises and act honestly in the future. And their willingness to behave in a trustworthy fashion toward those agencies could be undermined. The distrust between survivors and [government agencies](#) is then reciprocated, producing a barrier to communication and cooperation.

Unfortunately, these predictions seem to have played out in the relations between the supporters of survivors and government agencies. After protesters attempted to enter the town hall by force in the days following the fire, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) consequently [decided to hold](#) the next council meeting in private, excluding the Grenfell survivors – a move which [incited further protests](#) and bitterness among the community.

Finding a resolution

Further insights are provided by what are known as "[social exchange approaches](#)", which hold that trust is formed between individuals through exchanges through the exchange of good will and positive outcomes between individuals, determined by fair practices and just rules.

This account offers another reason why survivors might distrust government agencies – if they think that they were treated unfairly and unjustly by the agencies. This approach explains why survivors and their advocates [are seeking legal restitution](#) such as criminal charges, a public inquiry and an inquest.

These social psychological approaches come together to suggest a new and effective way of resolving the problem of distrust between survivors and government agencies. This would involve creating a nonpartisan independent organisation to orchestrate meetings between residents and government agencies. This would bring the parties together by [providing a structure for interactions](#) which both believe to be trustworthy.

Such meetings would give the parties equal status. The meetings would try to ensure that both parties communicate openly and honestly and express their promises for further actions in a clear and concrete form. The exchanges could then be documented as a formal resolution for government action. In this way, using insights from [social psychology](#) could help to redress the problem of [distrust](#) arising from the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and restore confidence in a fair and trustworthy government throughout the United Kingdom.

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