

The Social Dynamics of Trust: Theoretical and Empirical Research, 1985-2012¹

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A phenomenology of everyday life reveals trust as an irreducibly social foundation of interaction in the lifeworld (Weigert 1981:77, 80ff; Weigert 1983:180ff). As such, trust is an objective social reality not reducible to individualistic psychological factors (Lewis and Smith 1980; Kasperson, Golding and Tuler 2005:33-35). This holistic turn adds theoretical robustness and scope to the construct of trust as a social a priori for all levels of social interaction, whether deeply interpersonal or globally transnational in character (Lewis and Weigert 1985b). Trust as a realist social a priori remains relevant throughout emerging sociohistorical eras, such as an aborning global and cosmopolitan postmodern society, wherein cooperative actions may afford realist possibilities of trust emerging among contemporaries who know each other as strangers (Weigert 2012).

As postmodern society has generated both new opportunities and new challenges to trust at the interpersonal, organizational and cultural levels, cross-disciplinary research has intensified in all these areas (cf. Lane 2001). The brilliant theoretical insights pioneered by Georg Simmel and Niklas Luhmann that stimulated our early 1980's interest in trust have been carried forward most forcefully in recent years by Guido Möllering (2001a, 2006). Möllering (2006) also provides a critical assessment of other contemporary concepts of trust that, as Weber and Carter (2002) have noted, offer multiple definitions that are built on a highly rational idea of trust qua expectation.

The more rationalistic concept of trust contrasts to our traditional Simmelian view that the rational/cognitive dimension of trust is systemically related to both an emotional dimension and a behavioral dimension. Job (2005:5) similarly writes: "Few researchers see trust as a blend of the rational and the relational, for example, Lewis and Weigert (1985), and Dunn (2000, p. 76), who defines trust as both a 'passion', which is the 'confident expectation of benign intentions in another free agent', and a 'modality of action' which allows people to 'cope with uncertainty over time.'"

In his review of Piotr Sztompka's (1999) *Trust: A Sociological Theory*, Möllering (2001b) captures this contrast in more figurative imagery:

Finally, consider once more the sculpture of the ‘Illuminated Crowd’ shown on the cover of the book. One interpretation was that the light guides the crowd away from darkness; and Sztompka’s theory suggests that trust can be part of the classic source of enlightenment – human reason. Related to this is the notion of human control: if trust is functionally and instrumentally rational, then it is also controlling and controlled. However, is there not another view that conceptualizes trust as a response to the impossibility of control? In the words of Lewis and Weigert (1985:976): ‘Trust begins where prediction ends’. This is not the place to begin an alternative theory of trust, so let me just hint at what it might entail by referring to another interpretation of Mason’s sculpture (one close to the artist’s own interpretation). The illuminated crowd does not move towards the light, but undulates between light and darkness along ‘degrees of emotion’: illumination, hope, interest, hilarity, irritation, fear, sickness, hunger, violence, murder, and death (Edwards 1994:163). Trust is a phenomenon that embodies this human condition: the availability of some knowledge (light) on the one hand, and ‘the power of the unknown [shadows] in everyday reality’ (Edwards 1994:164) on the other.

In summary, we agree with Weber and Carter (2002), who draw from G.H. Mead and others, that trust is a foundational orientation between self and other. This orientation encompasses all three modes of human experience – emotion, cognition and behavior – standing in systemic and reciprocal reflexive relationships.

The Reflexive Relationship Between Emotional Trust and Cognitive Trust

Barbalet (2009) clarifies the reflexive interactions between the emotional and rational dimensions of trust. Like other irreducibly social emotions (e.g., shame, guilt, loyalty), the emotional content of trust is emergent and nontransitive. It involves a feeling of self-trust as well as other-trust, and this is why, when trust is betrayed, the emotional pain of self-reproach is experienced side-by-side with strong emotions toward the betrayer. Such residual emotional effects upon the trustor’s confidence in his or her own ability reliably to judge the trustworthiness of others may profoundly inhibit the trustor’s future capacity to trust even in the presence of strong rational reasons to do so.

Johnson and Grayson (2005:500), for instance, have empirically demonstrated that, even in the context of financial services exchanges, emotional trust is operative independently from cognitive trust: “Using survey data from 349 customers of a firm of financial advisers in the United Kingdom, our results show that cognitive and affective dimensions of trust can be empirically distinguished and have both common and unique antecedents.” Likewise, advertisers have long exploited the powerful effects of emotions on cognition – effects now confirmed by brain researchers (see Damasio 1996). McAllister’s (1997:98) findings concur: “The affective nature of trust significantly structures and directs subsequent information processing in ways that favor benevolent interpretations of the behavior of trusted individuals.”

Methodological Implications

Clearly, therefore, trust is a process containing complex feedback loops among these dimensions, contrary to the more simplistic, unidirectional causal models sometimes assumed by experimental researchers. In spite of efforts to clarify these linkages, Pennanen (2009:28) observes: “The relationship between trust and risk has confused researchers. For example, Mayer et al. (1995:711) state: it is unclear whether risk is an antecedent to trust, is trust, or is an outcome of trust.” These unclarities may result from an effort to depict trust via unidirectional and uncontextualized causal reasoning. Trust relationships have histories. Past risk taking can be viewed as an antecedent impulse to present risk taking, and future risk taking as the outcome of present risk taking. This perspective is an alternative to the common methodological imperative to arbitrarily designate risk taking as strictly an “independent” or “dependent” variable in a causal model.

McKnight, Cummings and Chervany (1995:3-4) similarly conclude:

Only a few researchers have attempted to display more than one of the dimensions of trust and how those relate to one another (Bromiley & Cummings 1995; Lewis and Weigert 1985a, b; Luhmann 1991; Zucker 1986). This raises the question: If one researcher defines trust on a widely different way from another researcher, how can the theoretical formulations and the empirical results of researchers build on each other?... Trust has usually been studied as a static, rather than dynamic variable (exceptions: Lewis&Weigert 1985a, b; Rempel, Holmes & Zanna 1985; Zucker 1986). This may have occurred because of the preponderant use of experimental or cross-sectional research methods (e.g. Bonoma 1976; Solomon 1960). But method should not drive the research stream. Rather, the methods should fit the phenomenon, and the trust phenomenon appears to be very dynamic.

Clarissa Cook (1997) also addressed this methodological concern in the second section of her more focused study:

Drawing upon the work of Lewis and Weigert (1985a:1985b), it outlines some requirements for a specifically sociological conception of trust, and emphasizes the need to distinguish between different levels and dimensions of trust. Considerable clarification and refinement of this kind is required if ‘trust’ is to become a truly useful theoretical tool within the health social sciences, and the social sciences more generally.

From our limited survey of the quantitative analysis of trust research, one of the most ambitious attempts to take up Cook’s theoretical/methodological challenge in the subfield of organizational research is the work of Colquitt, Scott and LePine (2007). We strongly recommend their analysis to researchers studying trust in business environments. Their study provides a meta-analytic test and resultant confirmation that the cognitive and emotional dimensions of trust are strong, independent and interconnected in the process of forming trusting

relationships within formal organizations. They consolidate the empirical findings from a large number of investigations, using path analysis and other statistical techniques. Their most elaborate path model contains 10 variables and 30 causal links (Colquitt, Scott and LePine 2007:921). They also validate a number of other hypotheses that are predictable from our conceptualization of trust.

Their only significant departure from our theoretical framework is that their path model does not include a feedback loop from risk-taking behavior (what we term “behavioral trust”) to trust expectations. That is, behavioral trust (risk-taking behaviors, role performance, etc.) not only results from trust expectations, it strengthens trusting expectations over time. The statistical confirmation of such a model would require a longitudinal study within an organization to assess changes in actors’ trusting cognitions/emotions/behaviors over time. That was not possible in their meta-analytic test, because most of the included studies were not longitudinal in design. This limitation will likely continue so long as researchers conceptually approach trust as a variable instead of a process (Khodyakov 2007).

Barbalet (1996) emphasizes also the need to take temporality seriously in the study of trust. He notes that temporality is inadequately treated in sociological writings, in spite of its importance for understanding ideas such as trust and loyalty. He adds that the examination of trust from the perspective of temporality specifies applications of rationality and clarifies some limitations with applying rational choice theory. For example, the rationality of trust cannot be fully assessed apart from the context of “social time” parameters that constrain the interactions (cf. Lewis and Weigert 1981).

A New Frontier: Trust and Distrust in a Postmodern World

At a macrotemporal level, we can see changes in trust dynamics in the transition from traditional to postmodern society. Seligman (1997) writes that the role of trust in social relations is becoming more essential in modern societies, because performance based on ascribed status-roles reinforced by severe sanctions is less assured. With this increased freedom and role ambiguity, trust is becoming another Simmelian cultural tragedy – most difficult to achieve precisely at a time when it is most urgently needed. Thus, the search for new modalities of trust continues apace.

This predicament is most evident when one considers macro issues such as global warming, world poverty and nuclear proliferation. Solutions to these global problems require cooperation among nations that are often distrustful and at times bitter rivals. Weigert (2012) argues that in the context of cosmopolitan interaction, the demonstration of behavioral trust can be a pragmatic tool for creating an atmosphere that may elicit cognitive and emotional trust. This is exactly the *reverse* of the “causal direction” presumed by most trust research we have described above. Yet, in some instances, it may be the most effective way to bridge a wide gap in trust expectations when the pillars of system trust are deteriorating.

For example, increasing inequality in democracies correlates with declining trust, which makes cooperation in fitting together lines of action more problematic. This correlation suggests hypotheses that link increasing polarization in economic and political spheres to declining trust within and across groups. One may further link increasing social polarization and uneven life chances to such declines in interpersonal and general trust that optimism is lost, despair emerges and negative futures motivate fear and anger – a social psychological matrix apt to motivate recourse to violence in the face of a stranger. Another salient contemporary trust link is between ideological fundamentalism and who is deemed trustworthy. Uslander finds that fundamentalists convinced they alone have the truth are less likely to trust others who do not have the truth (2002:77).

Greg Smith's personal testimony in his op-ed reflection upon leaving Goldman Sachs affirms what he labels a "basic truth" emphasizing the foundational importance of trust in contemporary finance: "if clients don't trust you they will eventually stop doing business with you" (2012:A25).

In the end, Seligman (2009) reminds us that, even when cooperative lines of action seem blocked by incommensurable objectives, an attitude of patient tolerance can at least salvage the last vestiges of trust and rescue us from descending into a Hobbesian state of war of all against all. We see salient instances of a Hobbesian world today in failed states with intractable intra-state violence as well as the threat of inter-state violence lurking under the aegis of rational national defense.

In Sum: Trust Remains Theoretically Fecund and Empirically Cumulative

In their Introduction to *Trust: Comparative Perspectives* (2012), the editors Masamichi Sasaki and Robert Marsh re-state parameters of trust as a "variable." They comment that

it is important to know the conditions that produce high levels of trust in some times and places, and low levels in other times and places. Modernization and its attendant social isolation, in the face of massive global changes, underscore the need to reexamine trust in all its multi-variate and multidisciplinary character. (2012:1)

As a variable, analysts adapt trust to different causal models, levels of analysis and analytic distinctions to focus their empirical studies. Such studies promise cumulative knowledge of the empirical and causal linkages of trust – up to a point. Yet just above this quote, Sasaki and Marsh start with a strong reference to Simmel and note that other classical and contemporary theorists posited that trust is "one of the most important integrative forces within society." Our understanding of the development of social knowledge is that theory as such is likely not cumulative, at least not in the aggregating sense in which empirical findings may be combined.

We judge that trust is both a widely operationalized variable and an analogously theorized "force" of social integration. Thus, trust is akin to a family of constructs with analogous meanings and varied operationalizations. It is at once

an explanatory construct and a sensitizing concept that refers to a universal aspect of social life writ from personal to global. As such, we believe that trust will continue to attract theoretical attention as sociohistorical contexts emerge and the search for understanding and meaning continue. We need not doubt that ongoing empirical studies will follow as the need for cooperation, profit, peace making, sustainability and justice grows ever more intense with world population surpassing 7 billion. From its demographic base, we foresee increasing proximity and resultant contacts demanding effective pragmatic trust.

Consider the beginning and ending formulations in our journey: from an interpretive tool in microanalysis to a realist and holistic feature of modern social orders and on to pragmatic enactments within an emerging global and wrenching cosmopolitan order. So, the theoretical arrows went from interpretation to cognition, affect and action, with probable causal arrows systematically reversible. Trust theory and research is a survival tool.

Note

1. A citation analysis for Lewis and Weigert 1985a as of March 29, 2012, by Kyle Willis, Sociology Librarian, University of Notre Dame, yielded in part these results: 571 total citations in Web of Science; most citations listed during 2002-2011 (total = 76.45%, leading years 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010); citations mainly distributed over the following disciplinary headings: Business/Economics, 52.4 percent; Computer Science, 21.4 percent; Psychology, 16.2 percent; Information and Library Science, 10.2 percent; Engineering, 8.7 percent; Sociology, 7.7 percent; Operations Research Management Science, 5.4 percent; Government Law, 4.2 percent; Social Sciences Other Topics, 3.2 percent; Public Administration, 3.1 percent; and h-index: 68 (an index to quantify scientific research output or "weight"). Business and Economics accounted for 52.4 percent of the citations, while social sciences generated only 10.9 percent. For us, this citation distribution suggests that, although many questions in the sociology of trust remain for sociologists to explore, sociological research on trust dynamics is visible to and utilized by researchers in other disciplines. We hope this outcome will encourage more sociologists to contribute toward a deeper understanding of trust dynamics across all social institutions.

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Note

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