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Connecting Trust to Society

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It is a great honour to introduce the first editorial of the Journal of Trust Studies (JOTS). This new journal has ambitious goals and aims to be a trusted platform for high-quality research, that drives fresh perspectives and a deeper understanding of trust in all its forms. This editorial explores a key theme: the concept of trust in the context of various societal issues. To begin, I will reference a pertinent quote from Simmel (1990) on the fundamental role of trust: 'Without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate' (p. 78). This Simmelian notion of trust reflects, on the one hand, that it is a fundamental pillar necessary for social cohesion and interaction, and on the other, that without it, social relationships and the structure of society would crumble. However, while trust is the invisible force that holds societies together, the erosion of trust has recently become profound in shaping the way people view the world. As a result, distrust (the opposite of trust) has become the foundation on which individuals, institutions, and communities operate. Restoring trust is no easy task; it requires meaningful effort to repair and rebuild relationships.

Another theme in Simmel's thinking about trust is the aspect of belief or state of faith, or what Mollering (2006) refers to as the suspension of uncertainty and vulnerability at the heart of the concept of trust. On this aspect of suspension, we cannot hold an overly idealistic and sentimental view of the expectations that people in society have when trust is lost. This is because the decline in trust is not merely a perception but a reality that affects governance, social stability, and everyday interactions. To borrow Tomlinson and Lewicki's (2006) view, once distrust is in place, it casts a powerful shadow, as subsequent interactions are met with suspicion and scepticism. Perhaps this is why, when trust is lost, the foundational structures

that support democracy, commerce, and social relations begin to fracture, leaving behind uncertainty and division. This is not a new theme, as Durkheim (1893) argued that social cohesion relies on the collective conscience and mutual trust among individuals, a view that is echoed by contemporary scholars like Fukuyama (1995), who contends that trust is central to economic prosperity and social stability. My assessment is that the ongoing discourse on trust, in both historical and modern contexts, continues to underscore its crucial role in promoting human progress.

I want to use my time within this editorial to look into the state of the increase in low-trust societies, especially focusing on issues that have emerged in recent years and how these challenges relate to the erosion of trust. It may not be a topic for dinner table conversation, but one would quickly agree that politicians and elected government officials have largely contributed to the erosion of trust, which has become a defining characteristic of modern society. Their main liabilities, in other words, serve as the ultimate source of widespread disillusionment with institutions, skepticism towards the media, and concerns over the ethical use of technology. This underpins nearly all other forms of trust erosion, such as at the meso level toward businesses and business leaders, and at the micro level within interpersonal relationships.

Yes, business leaders directly play an important role in trust erosion in the way they conduct their businesses with shareholders and end users, of course, but they are a smaller part of the overall issues at the top. To understand today's challenges, it is useful to start with some history. Even before the pandemic, the world was still struggling with the fallout from the global financial crisis-a period that had already shaken our trust in institutions. In response, the approach to managing public perception of the banking and financial services sector-rather than focusing solely on enforcing accountability-often relied on incentivisation rather than purely effective sanctioning mechanisms. This approach highlighted a clear disparity: while everyday citizens were held to strict standards, those in positions of power often enjoyed more lenient oversight.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 triggered a sudden and precipitous decline in societal trust, and to this day we continue to face the consequences of failing to ensure accountability for interventions that were meant to protect people. I will argue that trust eroded even further when rules that appeared to apply to politicians did not extend to the public. Separately, the rise of nationalism, the surge of populism in elections, and the shifting role of the media have

each contributed to the growing distrust in institutions. Nationalist movements challenged the legitimacy of global and governmental bodies, populist rhetoric fuelled scepticism toward traditional power structures, and the changing media landscape—driven by social media and misinformation—blurs the line between fact and opinion. Taken together, these forces do more than complicate the narrative; they actively shape how trust in institutions is built, sustained, or dismantled across different societies.

To be clear, the erosion of trust is not a new phenomenon, but its acceleration has given rise to a range of new vulnerabilities (see Rousseau et al., 1998; Mayer et al., 1995; Omeihe, 2023a). Among these potential vulnerabilities, I will highlight are the spread of misinformation and disinformation, the manipulation of public perception through digital platforms, declining confidence in institutions, and increased social and political polarisation. If left unchecked, these vulnerabilities can weaken democratic processes, undermine social cohesion, and erode the foundations of credible decision-making.

There are good reasons why trust, when broken, needs to be repaired. Social theorists have long emphasised the central role of trust in maintaining social order (Luhmann, 1979; Amoako, 2019; Omeihe, 2019) and its importance as a fundamental dimension of social interactions (Gambetta, 1988; Mayer et al., 1995; Möllering, 2006). The key point here is that trust must be a property of a collective unit, as social structures are inherently dependent on it (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). While this understanding is generally in place, there are times when individuals and institutions choose to ignore or disregard it, whether out of convenience, self-interest, or unwillingness to confront difficult realities.

But if trust is a set of socially learned and confirmed expectations that people have of each other, organisations, and institutions, then we are left with the substantial understanding that it is also part of the moral and natural order that shapes their lives. Trust reduces vulnerabilities arising from previous interactions, especially those with broader and more serious implications. This is a classic reality of our society today, and in my experience, there seems to be a growing need for it. Trust exists when members of a system act accordingly and feel secure in each other's expected futures (Barber, 1983). However, we seem to be increasingly reliant on self-preservation, rigid structures, and rhetoric that exploits fear rather than fostering confidence. This occurs when trust declines within society.

The Edelman Trust Barometer report (2024) paints a troubling picture: more than 60% of surveyed individuals believe that government leaders, business executives, and journalists deliberately mislead the public by making false statements or gross exaggerations-in a way that creates systemic risks that ripple across institutions. This revelation is not just another statistic; it speaks to a deepening crisis in credibility and underscores a widening gap between what people expect from their leaders and how those in power actually behave. When those at the helm of society are no longer trusted to tell the truth, the very structures meant to uphold democracy, economic stability, and social cohesion begin to fracture.

The decline in societal trust is not anecdotal-it has real and far-reaching consequences. Public cynicism breeds disengagement, misinformation thrives in the absence of credible voices, and the willingness to work toward collective solutions erodes. If trust continues to wither at this pace, we risk a world where scepticism replaces cooperation and where division deepens in the void left by lost faith in leadership.

But we now find ourselves in a world where public institutions face an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. In democratic societies, the urgent challenge is not just recognising this erosion of trust but actively working to restore it-both in how people perceive institutions and in their faith in society as a whole. Without serious efforts to rebuild credibility, the trust deficit will only deepen, fuelling the very instability that Fukuyama (1995) warned is characteristic of low-trust societies. The real question is not just whether trust can be repaired, but whether we are willing to do the hard work required to rebuild it. Are we destined for a future where scepticism and disillusionment dominate, or can we restore faith in our institutions and each other? These are not new concerns, but addressing them demands more than empty rhetoric-it requires a sustained commitment to trustworthiness, integrity, reliability, and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995). Rebuilding trust is neither quick nor easy, but without it, the very foundations of a stable and cohesive society remain at risk.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the features of trust repair as irrelevant to what society needs and what people genuinely want. Tillmar's (2002) study of Tanzanian businesspeople reminds us that, rather than taking a big leap of faith, individuals in precarious situations often prefer smaller, cautious steps toward trust. This underscores Möllering's (2006) argument that a leap of faith is central to the very concept of trust. Moreover, we must recognise that in many situations, people simply cannot make that leap-and without it, trust remains out of reach. In a discussion years ago with Peter Li at a conference in Dublin, I leant that trust-building is

similar to two people preparing for marriage. The leap of faith here involves the suspension of doubt, an expectation of benevolence, and, as Giddens (1991) and Möllering (2006) suggest, a process that allows trust to form. When this state of trust is reached, it helps to block existential anxieties and creates a foundation upon which relationships—and indeed societies—can thrive.

It is striking how the notion of the leap of faith resonates when trust is considered in the context of recent innovations. On the one hand, social media has transformed the way information is disseminated, often prioritising sensationalism over accuracy. On the other hand, the impact of misinformation today is instructive. The way it spreads has dealt a significant blow to public perception, thereby making it increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction. This issue has been extensively explored by Vosoughi and colleagues (2018), who found that false news was more novel than true news, suggesting that people were more likely to share novel information. While false stories triggered fear, disgust, and surprise in responses, true stories evoked anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust.

It follows from this that if we are indifferent to whether the news, we receive is accurate, it becomes harder to see the stark contrast when the gatekeepers of our news appear to be more interested in emotional manipulation than in the truth – adding to the challenges we face in restoring trust amidst the noise of misinformation. We are reminded once again that once distrust sets in, it casts a huge shadow over relationships and that leaps of faith are constrained by the 'realisations of suspicion and doubt' that people develop over time (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Tomlison & Lewicki, 2006; Omeihe, 2023b). This is why we are seeing people increasingly turn to alternative, trusted sources of information instead of the established mainstream media outlets to which we have become accustomed over the years. Here, I may appear to contradict myself, as some alternative sources may lack credibility and further deepen ideological silos. Ultimately, this is a roundabout way of saying that we need more trustworthy sources of information-and the evidence is clear: people want to trust.

There are two further steps in my argument. The first is to ask: if we are indifferent to the crisis of trust-whether distrust is shaping global tensions – are we likewise indifferent to the persistently strained relationships between nations that are reshaping global alliances and trade? The answer to that must surely be no. The reason is that economic interdependence, which was once seen as a pathway to economic stability, has now become a source of vulnerability. As a result, many nations are prioritising the safeguarding of their interests and

adjusting power structures accordingly, other things equal. This, of course, underscores why trust must underpin international politics, power, and collective action across the full spectrum of global issues (e.g. Hardy et al., 1998; Skinner et al., 2014; Fulmer & Dirks, 2018; Möllering, 2019; Möllering & Sydow, 2019), because a climate of suspicion and strategic rivalry undermines cooperation and renders multilateral efforts increasingly difficult to sustain. The final step is to ask why international institutions, which have historically played a role in mediating conflicts and sustaining trust, are experiencing diminished credibility-or whether there are reasons why accusations of bias and inefficiency have further eroded confidence in global governance. A priori, one might argue that the reason lies in the inherent asymmetry between trust and distrust: when a high level of trust is expected, any instance of distrust can feel like a profound betrayal, prompting suspicion, caution, and a reassessment of the other party's trustworthiness (Gillespie, 2017).

But if, for some reason, distrust in institutions is likely to occur, then institutions need to decide how to repair trust—a task that remains daunting. For me, this justifies why the notion of simply repairing trust becomes irrelevant if conditions that are favourable to the maintenance of trust are not created (Kramer & Lewicki, 2010; Omeihe, 2019). We have seen enough evidence indicating the negative effects of distrust in deterring cooperation and positive relationship outcomes (Bottom et al., 2002; Croson et al., 2003; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Amoako, 2019; Six & Latusek, 2023). This is because the institutional basis of trust is the most important determinant of trust within a society — and such institutions need to be engaged and encouraged to pursue two sequential but fundamental processes of trust repair: reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust. And there are good reasons for this.

Over time, the issue of reconciliation has come to be viewed as the manifestation of forgiveness when distrust sets in. It is a persistent feature of the victim's decision to put aside grievances or the desire to punish the erring party. Even when issues of distrust are difficult to resolve, reconciliation is effective when sincerity is evident and conveys a sense of making swift amends (Aquino et al., 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2004).

On the issue of rebuilding, the process is further complicated today by the question of whether it is truly possible to restore the vitality of relationships—particularly in our highly multipolar world, where countries are underpinned by divergent philosophies. This strikes me as fundamental. The conclusion to be drawn here is that, to rebuild trust, institutions must do everything within their power to make it work. This includes adopting structural arrangements

that govern future interactions, such as procedures and policies. Not least because the importance of substantive responses lies in the delivery of tangible measures—responses that are perceived as more credible in efforts to repair trust. This could involve the use of tactics such as monitoring, which improves the reliability of behaviour and thereby contributes to restoring trust (Sitkin & Roth, 1993).

We do not want to rely solely on apologies. While apologies may be effective to a degree and may or may not support longer-lasting outcomes, they are often dismissed as 'cheap talk' (Farrell & Gibbons, 1989; Bottom et al., 2002; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Dirks et al., 2009). What is needed are substantive amends, which have a more significant effect on repairing trust. Still, we cannot deny that the practical significance of trust repair ultimately lies in the willingness to reconcile relationships after trust has been broken.

Some final thoughts

This brings me, finally, back to the point of speaking about societal trust. Clearly, the context matters significantly when connecting trust to society. This underlines Fukuyama's (1995) recognition of high-trust and low-trust societies. At its core, Fukuyama's thesis draws a stark distinction between trust societies, where high-trust environments are characterised by a greater level of institutional trust, and low-trust environments, is marked by low institutional trust. Here, high-trust societies have a greater chance of success as they tend to exhibit greater economic dynamism, lower levels of corruption, and more effective governance. In contrast, low-trust societies are characterised by weak and deficient institutional frameworks, and allegedly suffer from fragmentation, corruption, and institutional inertia.

Up to a point, Fukuyama's work remains an elegant theory and has undeniable intuitive appeal. However, it has faced criticisms, particularly for its cultural determinism and the use of such dichotomies to justify policy inaction. The conversation about trust and societies needs to be situated within a broader, more nuanced framework.

As I have said many times, trust is real. It shapes how we organise, how we govern, and how we live together. But it is not immutable. It underlines that societies can build and foster trust – or squander it – depending on the paths they choose. Amidst the growing institutional distrust in historically 'high-trust' societies, it may be time to reconsider the assumptions we know. The question is not merely which societies have trust, but how we build it—and, crucially, who we trust to do so.

Now, I have one more thing to say. Looking ahead, as a new journal, the forthcoming issues of the JOTS should serve to inspire and address many of the contextual issues we face within society. The lesson we can draw is that trust is needed today more than ever.

As I have become more confident that trust is likely to evolve with the pace of societal growth and change, I have become concerned that the rate of distrust might overtake trust. The conclusion I draw here is that we must do all we can to make trust work, and this should be an acknowledged objective. At a time when division feels more visible than unity, and doubt more present than assurance, exploring what it means to build and sustain trust has never felt more urgent—or more hopeful.

For us, the JOTS is born from the belief that trust is not merely an academic subject, but the quiet architecture of every thriving society. As we move forward, the journal will focus on diagnosing issues of trust and the differing impacts of distrust on society's outlook. Our aim is to create a space where scholars, practitioners, and readers can come together to question, learn, and, we hope, restore faith in the shared project of trust and what it means for society. These are critical issues.

On this note, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the editorial team, whose thoughtfulness, care, and conviction made this first editorial possible. I am also glad to welcome all the associate editors, who will help future authors make the most of the papers to be published.

To conclude, I hope you find this editorial not only insightful but also connected. Above all, I hope this new journal earns your trust—one issue at a time.

About the Author

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