



Book Reviews

Guido Möllering **Trust: Reason, Routine, Reflexivity**

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With this book Guido Möllering has made an original, interesting and useful contribution to the trust literature. Two features stand out. The first is a focus on the 'leap of faith' or 'suspension of doubt' that is essential for trust. The second is an emphasis on the 'reflexive' process nature of trust, with trust emerging from ongoing interactions, embedded in specific conditions, and the idiosyncrasy involved in developing trust, with its leap of faith. This has implications for an interpretive, ethnographic approach as a favoured methodology for trust research.

The book is aimed at advanced students and scholars in the social sciences. It confesses a bias towards sociological organization theory and empirical applications in business studies, but makes an effort to make room for other perspectives. It offers an impressively complete review of the large literature on trust, and delves deeply into several streams of thought. The book is also well written: it is a pleasure to read, and offers lucid argumentation.

After an introductory discussion of the aim and scope of the book, in Chapter 2 a brief review is given of various paradigms of trust: Rationalist perspectives where trust is based on perceived trustworthiness, and on an assessment of utility in strategic interaction, in calculated bets; and an economic perspective, characterized by an obsession with detrimental actions of others (opportunism), to the neglect of positive outcomes. In these perspectives, analysis is typically supported by game-theory. The author notes, correctly in my view, that such analysis equates trust to cooperation. In the trust literature, this is known as 'trusting behaviour', as distinct from trust as a mental state. It is the latter, the mental state, that the author is interested in. In view of this, one wonders about the usefulness of going to such lengths (30 pages) in detailing the rationalist, economic approaches that are rejected for the purpose of this book. The book starts to come more into its own where it discusses a perspective of combining rationality and emotions, with emotions not only complementing rationality but enabling it. The author concludes that 'The key consideration is ... that trust goes beyond the available good reasons that indicators of trustworthiness help to identify' (p. 49).

In Chapter 3, to explore what goes 'beyond the available good reasons', the author gives an extensive discussion of the relation between trust and routine, in the 'taken-for-grantedness' of trust, delving into phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and neoinstitutionalism, with reference to, among others, the works of Schütz,

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Garfinkel, Berger & Luckmann's social construction of society, the related work of Zucker, and Dimaggio & Powell's mechanisms of institutional isomorphism. This yields the conclusion that '... rules, roles and routines are bases for trust in so far as they represent taken-for-granted expectations that give meaning to, but cannot guarantee, their fulfillment in action' (p. 70). This leads on to a discussion of the basis for trust in a variety of institutions.

In Chapter 4, to analyse the trust process, the author moves on to agency, in a reflexive process of active interaction, adopting, among other views, Giddens' perspective of 'active trust'. Reflexiveness entails that perspectives of agents change along the process. Related to this, the chapter also goes into Luhmann's 'principle of gradualness', and Zand's work on trust, yielding a 'spiral reinforcement model of trust'. There, trust yields disclosure of information, acceptance of influence from others, and relaxation of control, yielding a further increase of trust. In this chapter there is also some attention to failures of trust: its breakdown and the possibility that too much trust leads to rigidities and resultant lack of innovation. This is a welcome addition to the analysis, which in most of the book is biased towards the positive side of trust. Here, reference is made to the work of Frédérique Six (2005), who studies trouble and the breakdown of trust, and gave the insight that rather than trust meaning 'being nice to each other', it can provide the *basis* for conflict, which when solved can deepen trust. I would have liked to see more than a passing reference to these conflictual features of trust and their potential for both destruction and deepening of trust. There may be a virtuous cycle of trust, openness, acceptance of influence, release of control. There may also be a vicious circle of misunderstanding or conflict, suspicion, increase of control and a breakdown of trust. Chapter 4 also delves into the importance for trust of familiarity, and how it develops. This is very useful, but here also a question arises concerning the possible downside of familiarity. Too much familiarity may reduce variety of insight and knowledge, with a negative effect on the creative potential of a relationship.

In Chapter 5, the book arrives at what I see as its core, where the preceding analyses culminate in an analysis of the 'leap of faith' involved in trust, with the work of Georg Simmel as the fountainhead of inspiration. A characteristic feature of trust is that it requires a suspension of doubt, because in view of fundamental uncertainties of behaviour assurance can never be complete and some vulnerability always remains. This is a fundamental point, and the chapter has much enlightenment to offer on it. However, I have a few points of criticism here. First, I think the originality of the view is somewhat overstated. The trust literature has recognized the 'paradox of information' (Pagden 1988): trust entails both some information (on trustworthiness) and lack of information (one can never be certain). This implies that to achieve action one needs to suspend whatever uncertainty and vulnerability remains. Of course, this does not detract from the importance of analyzing the leap of faith. And many people may not have taken note of the paradox of information. Second, while it is suggested in several places in the book that this need for suspension is not only characteristic of trust but also unique to it, I think it is more a universal aspect of the human condition. The human is swamped with radical uncertainties throughout his life. Will the car start after a night of frost? Will I not be killed on the road or in the air? Will I be

up to the next challenge in life? Will I wake up tomorrow? Am I a good parent? What is truth? In all these cases there is lack of certainty and assurance, and the consequent need to suspend doubt or renounce all action. Again, this does not detract from the need to pay attention to suspension of doubt in trust, but points at the need to recognize the wider import of such suspension. My third point of criticism, or I would rather say doubt, concerns the following. The discussion in Chapter 5 seems to adopt the notion from the literature that trust entails an illusion or fiction, 'as if' there were no uncertainty. On p. 115 it is said that actors '... bracket out irreducible social vulnerability and uncertainty as if they were favorably resolved'. I am not sure of this. It seems to me that people continue to know full well that uncertainty remains, but accept this as an irreducible fact of life more generally. At best, people are able to relegate doubt from what Polanyi (1962) called 'focal' to 'subsidiary' awareness. This relegation to subsidiary awareness, it seems to me, is also closely related to the notion of a routine, discussed in Chapter 3. On p. 119 of the book it is said, following Luhmann, that trust is an 'operation of the will.. to either suspend uncertainty and vulnerability or not'. This, it seems to me, is closer to the truth. The difference may seem subtle, but it may be important to get away from certainty as an ideal that trust aims to mimic. Uncertainty should not be denied or hidden but should be accepted. However, the most important point here is that we are dealing with matters of fact that social psychology should be able to help us with, in its study of partly conscious, partly unconscious processes and heuristics of inference, attribution and decision. So, let us ally with social psychologists to find out what is in fact going on when people make inferences and decisions in uncertain interaction, and what is behind the leap of faith.

Chapter 6 reviews and discusses methods of empirical trust research. The author recognizes (p. 125) that there are contrasting methodologies, in the familiar trade-off between rigour and generalizability on the one hand, and richness of the details of process on the other hand. The author recognizes that 'ultimately both are required in order to keep the field productive. Moreover, many of us tend to switch happily between the two sides ourselves'. The author proceeds to claim that here and now, given the key issues of the suspension of doubt and the process nature of trust that form the focus of the book, there is a need for more richness, in 'interpretive', detailed case studies, to unravel the complexities of interaction, the embeddedness of trust in specific contexts, and the idiosyncrasy involved in perceptions and emotions that form part of the trust process. I sympathize with that. However, the book here somewhat overstate its case. Professed methodological pluralism tends to slide into a censure of research aimed at rigour, measurement and generalization. Certainly quantification and testing of systematic coherence of factors entails a reduction of richness, context specificity and idiosyncrasy, and the question remains as to what extent such reduction is acceptable. On the other hand, rich case description leaves us with doubts concerning external validity.

Putting his methodological preference to work, in Chapter 7, the author recounts three extensive, rich interpretive case studies of buyer-supplier relations in the printing industry, with a careful analysis of both sides of the relationship. Here, he is aware of reflexivity not only between the actors involved

but also between the researcher and the actors, with a danger of imposing issues and interpretations on respondents. To avoid this as much as possible, interviews and conversations are minimally structured in advance, and are allowed to take their own direction. The result is indeed a wealth of insight in the intricacies, idiosyncrasies, shifts and vagaries of the trust process. Thus, the research achieves its intended purpose. For example, there are nice illustrations of the relation between trust in a person and trust in the organization he/she works for (p. 169). However, I am left with questions of ‘so what’ and ‘what have I learned for the theory of trust’? The argument for case studies often is that it allows for ‘theoretical generalization’. For that, it seems to me, one would want to analyze more systematically whether the elements that show up in the case studies reflect theory, contradict it, or yield new theoretical insights or possibilities. There seem to be ample opportunities for this. The relation between trust in people and in organizations, just indicated, is one. Another is where one of the respondents says that ‘the main thing to do in creating trust in new relationships ... is “both parties letting the other know what is expected of them and what they expect of the other one”’ (p. 167). Could we see this as an illustration of the systematic importance of ‘voice’, or perhaps as an addition or specification of it? There is also an interesting outcome of reversals between being advantaged and being disadvantaged, along the business cycle, and the idea that this may act as a ‘shadow of the future’, making people careful not to exploit any temporary upper-hand position, since it may reverse. Could that apply more generally to buyer-supplier relationships? I would have liked to see more of such theoretical reflections on results. In this respect it seems that the potential of case studies is greater than utilized. Finally, in Chapter 8 the author provides conclusions and indicates avenues for further research.

In sum, Guido Möllering has given us an important book, raising crucial issues of the suspension of doubt and process phenomena of trust that merit more attention. He has approached these issues with in-depth scholarship, tapping from a wide range of literature. His exposition is clear. I agree with most of his conclusions and suggestions for further research. He does somewhat overstate the novelty and the uniqueness to trust of the suspension of doubt, and does not quite resolve how it works. As the author acknowledges, ‘trust research needs to find out how the leap (of faith) is made’ (p. 192). For that, it seems to me, we might mobilize insights from social psychology. However, the issue has been put on the agenda, insight into it has been improved, and good further questions have been asked. I recommend the book to all scholars interested in what happens in trust beyond rational calculation.

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