

TALKING ABOUT TRUST

The Nature of Trust



Trust exists within relationships such that there is always a **trustor** (the person who is doing the trusting), a **trustee** (the object of that trust) and a focal **context**. Trustors are usually individuals but trustees can be individual people or collective groups or even institutions.

Trustors, trustees, and contexts are **dynamic**. At any given point, an individual can both be a trustor and a trustee and those relationships inform each other. One of the most efficient ways for a trustor to increase trust in him/herself is to display their own trust in the trustee.



Trust is usually **particular** to all of these things. A specific trustor may trust a specific trustee in a specific context but the elements of that trust will change if the trustor, trustee, or context change and they often do.

The Essence of Trust

Trust is rooted in **vulnerability**, or a potential for harm. Take for example a trust fall. The trustor is clearly the person who is at risk of harm, in this case, from hitting the ground. The trustee is the person who controls that potential for harm, in this case, by catching the trustor.

Trust itself is the trustor's internalized **willingness** to accept their vulnerability to (*i.e.*, potential for harm from) the deliberate actions of the other person. That is to say that trust exists when the trustor recognizes that the trustee is able to make intentional decisions that impact the potential for harm and is willing to engage with them anyway.

The potential harms can arise from **outcomes** or **processes**. An individual can be harmed because the trustee does or fails to do something that causes harm or because of the way that is done. Thus, harm can exist even in the face of a positive outcome if, for example, the trustee rudely dismisses the trustor's perspective.



When a governance entity is a trustee, vulnerabilities come in two flavors. Governmental actors are, in many ways, empowered by their people with the goal of using that power to protect their constituency.

External vulnerabilities refer to the potential for harms that come from outside of the relationship and focus on harms that government is intended to protect the people from (*e.g.*, social disorder).

Internal vulnerabilities refer to the potential for harms that arise from within the relationship therefore focus on harms that are caused while doing that job (*e.g.*, providing racially disproportionate outcomes).

The (Linear) Process of Trust

Interactions

The first step in the process is for the trustor acquire to information about the trustee through an interaction. These interactions can either be **personal** (where the individuals interact directly) or **vicarious** (where the actual interaction happens with someone who conveys that information to the trustor). Common examples of vicarious information sources are friends, family, and the media.



Evaluations

From this information, the trustor forms a series of evaluations about the trustor. The three evaluations that are most commonly shown to matter are the trustee's **ability** (capacity to do what its trusted to do), **benevolence** (care for the trustor or people like them), and their **integrity** (likelihood they decide to would do the right thing).



Internalizations

From these evaluations, the trustor internalizes **psychological states**. Trust is one such internalization in which the trustor is willing to accept their vulnerability to the deliberate actions of the trustee.



Although it is illustrative to think about the process of trust as linear, it is important to remember that, in practice, it is often much more complicated. When thinking about a new trustee in a social vacuum, information must drive evaluations which must drive internalizations but this is a rarity in the “real world”. In most relationships for which trust matters, interactions, evaluations, and internalizations co-exist and can influence each other at any time. For example, if a specific trustee is trusted, that will make the trustor more likely to see interactions positively. Conversely, if a trustee is not trusted, the trustor is more likely to have a negative evaluation, even if the information from the interactions has not changed.

Trust is also susceptible to pressures from outside of this process—the trustor and the context both exert their own direct and indirect pressures. Thus, a trustor who has a negative interaction with a trustee may still want to trust them because of some benefit that is conferred. Similarly, a trustor who has some reason to want to not trust a trustee may do so even when the information from the interactions is positive. This is part of the reason why trust can be so hard to increase. A trustor who has been harmed may be motivated to not trust, and this motivation can be strong enough to negate positive, new information. A trustor who lives in an untrusting community is similarly motivated by community norms, as is a child who is raised in a family that does not trust a particular trustee.

Trust often co-occurs with a number of similar concepts and, as a result, is sometimes conflated with them. It is nonetheless important to be able to distinguish between these ideas, especially because they do not have to happen at the same time. Trust is often the most difficult and last of these concepts to develop so a lack of trust does not mean that these other constructs do not exist.

Credibility exists when information presented is perceived to be believable. This means that, unlike trust, credibility is an evaluation of the other entity. Thus, credibility differs from trust in that it occurs earlier in the process. One can internalize trust towards someone they evaluate to be credible but it is also possible to not trust them.

Credibility



Satisfaction exists when an individual evaluates the information relevant to the other entity positively and internalizes that evaluation. Thus, like trust, satisfaction is an internalization but unlike trust, satisfaction is backwards looking and does not mean that the individual is willing to accept vulnerability. One can be satisfied and yet believe that trust is unwarranted.

Confidence exists when an individual believes that interacting with an other entity will go well in the future. Like trust, this concept is an internalization within the individual that is based on evaluations but, unlike trust, it does not require a willingness to accept vulnerability. Thus, one can feel confident in how a specific other will act and yet not be willing to accept vulnerability to them

