Unpacking Trust for the Future of Society

A Strategic Plan for TRUSST Research

May 20, 2022

Trust matters. Across relationships, the willingness to accept vulnerability to potential injury at the hands of another—that is, trust—is critical for social cohesion. Without it, we become less willing to take risks, cooperate in the pursuit of shared goals, or even engage enough to find common ground. Our overarching goal is to contribute to the development of an interdisciplinary social science of trust capable of supporting healthy trusting relationships. Our efforts to date bring together substantive and methodological academic knowledge from a variety of research domains and leverage strong relationships with a variety of practitioners. From this initial work, we have identified three areas that we believe to be critical to understanding, protecting, and repairing trust across contexts. Our program of research will foreground these areas over at least the next five years.

Trust and Vulnerability: We know that trust exists when an individual feels willing to accept their vulnerability to an interaction partner, but we know much less about the vulnerabilities trustors care most about and how they can most effectively be protected in trust-building efforts.

Trust and Motivation: We often assume that evidence of trustworthiness builds trust, but we know much less about how to address the reality that who we trust is motivated by social pressures like socialization and identification.

Trust and Power: We know that access to power structures within society shapes who has the luxury of feeling that their vulnerability is protected by institutions like the government, science, and the police, but we know much less about how best to close that distance while respecting ideological differences.

To support our efforts in addressing these three challenges, we launched the Teaching, Researching, and Understanding the Social Science of Trust (TRUSST) Lab. The lab leverages the expertise of students and faculty from across Michigan State University and beyond to conduct research that effectively advances these three areas in relationships of practical importance. Our work is therefore not limited to any individual perspective or skillset and instead benefits from the thinking of an interdisciplinary group of trust scholars. The specific contexts of our research are therefore constantly negotiated but there are a few that we expect to consistently address; namely, governance issues relating to the legal system, the environment, and both state and federal government agencies. We also expect a noteworthy focus on marginalized groups and on young people who will not only benefit from the experience of doing this work as part of the lab and from the integration of our findings in teaching, but who will also be asked to provide their perspectives as a key part of the future of our society.

We operationalize success as our contribution to new scholarly thinking about trust and support of practitioners for whom trust is important. Regarding the former, we will present our work to academic organizations, notably including the First International Network of Trust, and will preparing academic articles for submission to a variety of scholarly outlets. Regarding our practical impact, we will continue to work closely with practitioner organizations for whom we will prepare research reports to ensure the accessibility of our findings (available at TRUSSTLab.com/resources). A key goal of our efforts will be to position students to continue these mutually beneficial relationships as they complete their academic milestones and after graduation.

Trust (or its absence) is an important part of all social relationships. We look forward to joining a wide diversity of scholar in advancing a cross-boundary social science of trust through a specific focus on vulnerability, motivation, and power.