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THE LEAP OF FAITH

5.1 THE MISSING ELEMENT: SUSPENSION

Our understanding of trust is already enhanced significantly if we recognize that all three perspectives introduced in the previous chapters highlight important aspects of the phenomenon we are interested in. Trust is indeed a matter of reason, routine or reflexivity depending on how we look at it. When we look at empirical manifestations of trust, though, we must acknowledge that our analytical distinctions are somewhat artificial and simplistic, even if helpful for systemizing the literature (Lane, 1998), because the three ‘mechanisms’ usually play together. Research focusing on only one of them, for example on cognition, taken-for-grantedness or communication loops, is bound to miss important influences from, and interactions with, other mechanisms that cannot easily be held under *ceteris paribus* conditions. Trust research needs to be broad, applying multiple perspectives in order to form a picture of the enormous elephant called trust, as in the classic Indian fable.

So far, in this book, continuing the fable analogy, I have brought together three of the most important ‘blind men’ who attempt to describe trust. My central argument, however, relates to the fact that they are indeed blind, because they tend to confound reason, routine or reflexivity as bases for trust with the process of reaching the state of trust as such. In trying to explain trust by looking at one or more mechanisms, they cannot see that the essence of trust, by definition, cannot be captured fully by those mechanisms. Put differently, by subsuming trust as a form of ra-

tional choice, routine behaviour or reflexive reinforcement, the concept is stripped of its *unique* explanatory power.

In Chapter 2, we saw that trust only ever enters as a meaningful construct when decisions *cannot* be made in a strictly calculative way, which happens to be the rule rather than the exception. For well-structured problems with clear alternatives and expected values, no reference to trust is necessary. Game-theoretic considerations are mainly instructive in the way they are able to describe the kind of dilemma situations in which trust matters as a solution *outside* of game theory.

In Chapter 3, I outlined an institutional approach to trust as a matter of taken-for-granted routines, in order to highlight a different set of influences on trust which, however, cannot and should not be seen as removing the prevalent social uncertainty and vulnerability implied in all trust. Insofar as institutions are substitutes for trust, they cannot explain it and rather suggest the dispensability of trust. Even in this case, there still remains the problem of trust in institutions since they are also objects of trust. If, however, institutions are seen as promoters of trust, as I have mainly presented it, then we need to recognize that they are only a part of the explanation of trust and probably the more important part is still missing, namely how actors deal with the uncertainty and vulnerability that cannot be reduced by institutions and that may even be a feature of dynamic institutions.

In Chapter 4, trust was explained as the outcome of a gradual process of interaction beginning with small steps, displaying some kind of self-reinforcement and always requiring a certain level of initiative from the actors involved. Once again, it is important to recognize this processual aspect of trust, but if the 'trust process' were inevitable in the sense that actors could be sure that over time their uncertainty and vulnerability will be reduced, then we either assume, ironically, that the outcome of the trust process is that trust is no longer necessary or we ignore the crucial questions of what it takes to start and maintain the trust-building process when uncertainty and vulnerability remain an issue and what trust as such means when it has been produced. Altogether, it is my feeling that the three perspectives I have introduced all miss the point. But what is that point? What is the important missing element which captures the true essence of trust that makes it a unique phenomenon and such a powerful concept?

Before I explore these questions and offer an answer to what the essential element in trust could be, the well-known study of 'swift trust' by Debra Meyerson, Karl Weick and Roderick Kramer can serve as an illus-

tration of how the different perspectives on trust presented in previous chapters can contribute individually and in combination to our understanding of trust – and, equally, of how they miss the point (see also Möllering, 2005b). The empirical situation that Meyerson et al. (1996) have in mind is the development of trust in temporary work groups. The authors cite numerous examples of such groups and note that they are increasingly formed both within and between organizations, but the prime example to which they keep referring is the film production crew.

Temporary work groups are typically formed in order to accomplish a specific, often complex and critical project through the collaboration of specialists who possess very different but interdependent skills. These experts may have little opportunity to get to know each other in advance of the project. Nor do they know if they will be working together again after the project is completed. That the latter is not necessarily the case has been highlighted by research identifying ‘project networks’ as an organizational form, where the formation of short-term project teams is strongly dependent on the existence of long-term social networks (DeFilippi and Arthur, 1998; Windeler and Sydow, 2001), but we can assume nevertheless that a temporary work group commonly does not have a strong history. Meyerson et al. (1996) are fascinated by the paradox that such ‘temporary systems act as if trust were present, but their histories seem to preclude its development’ (p. 167).

The three perspectives introduced earlier give partial explanations for this ‘swift trust’. It could be a matter of reason, since the group members know that their interests are encapsulated in so far as their own performance will be measured in terms of the overall project success. There may also be a ‘shadow of the future’ (see Chapter 2) in that team members might meet again on future projects and need to maintain their professional reputation. Hence, good reasons for trusting can be found, but the danger of opportunistic behaviour in the group remains. Members stay vulnerable and lack certainty that the others are professionally committed and resistant to short-term temptations. Therefore, swift trust ‘may rest upon particular reasons, but is not explained by them’ (Simmel, 1990, p. 179).

Alternatively, swift trust could be described as a matter of routine. When embarking on a new project, team members will take many written and unwritten rules for granted. They are assigned specific roles on the team and by referring to such roles everybody knows fairly well what is expected of them and what they can expect of others. Accordingly, Meyerson et al. (1996) note that ‘an increase in role clarity leads to a decrease

in expected ill will, and an increase in trust presumes that roles in temporary systems are clear' (p. 173). When people deal with each other more as roles than as individuals, they can trust routinely. In other words, the natural attitude in temporary teams may be to comply with the usual roles and routines. Nevertheless, this can only be an incomplete and probably misleading explanation, too, because there is no certainty for the trustor that everybody on the team knows the roles and routines and is competent and willing to perform them. If this certainty existed, trust would be obsolete. Since it cannot exist and since there is always role negotiability (Seligman, 1997), trust refers to role expectations but requires more than that.

Third, swift trust may develop almost instantaneously but there is still a reflexive process to be observed. As Meyerson et al. show, the team members tend not to commit themselves too much in the beginning and remain more cautious than they appear. They follow the 'principle of gradualness' (Luhmann, 1979) and the main difference to other situations could be that, by the nature of the project, the intensity of interaction between team members is very great from the start so that, even within hours of working together, trust builds up reflexively and the stakes can be raised relatively quickly. Frequent communication is required on projects and this may facilitate the maintenance of trust even when there are changes in the project. Team members are thus able to work on trust as envisaged by Giddens (1994b). The first encounters that set the reflexive trust-building process in motion remain crucial, though, and Meyerson et al. (1996) observe that 'people have to wade in on trust rather than wait while experience gradually shows who can be trusted and with what' (p. 170). Swift trust is therefore a very active trust. This said, there is no guarantee that a self-reinforcing spiral of trust development will emerge from initial interactions. Meyerson and her colleagues remind us that many temporary work groups fail to develop swift trust and quite a number of projects go wrong, especially in the early stages, when a cooperative team can turn into a competitive one, jeopardizing its chances of success. Once again, although it is instructive to consider the processual element even in swift trust, the problem of uncertainty and vulnerability on the part of the actors involved is not explained away, but rather emphasized, when we consider situations in which people on a team just have to get on with it pragmatically.

Even if swift trust is only a cursory example intended as an illustration of the argument so far, it seems fair to note that we regularly arrive at the point where reason, routine and/or reflexivity are mechanisms that pro-

vide a basis for trust but do not explain how irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability are dealt with in trust. By focusing on the bases for trust only, we run the risk of explaining away trust itself or, at least, of explaining anything but trust.

As I have already claimed elsewhere (Möllering, 2001), I believe that Georg Simmel identified the missing element in the concept of trust about a century ago, but we lost sight of it again even though his original ideas had a strong influence on some important contributions to the trust literature (notably Frankel, 1977; Luhmann, 1979; Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Giddens, 1990; Misztal, 1996; Lane, 1998). Simmel ([1907] 1990) notes that trust needs to be 'as strong as, or stronger than, rational proof or personal observation' for social relationships to endure, and he gives examples of one kind of trust which 'is only a weak form of inductive knowledge' (p. 179). The examples are the farmer's belief that his crops will grow and the trader's belief that his goods will be desired. The important detail here is that Simmel does not regard mere weak inductive knowledge as proper trust (Giddens, 1991). Within trust there is a 'further element of socio-psychological quasi-religious faith' (Simmel, 1990, p. 179).

In the same source, Simmel expresses that he finds this element 'hard to describe' and thinks of it as 'a state of mind which has nothing to do with knowledge, which is both less and more than knowledge'. He expresses this element of faith as 'the feeling that there exists between our idea of a being and the being itself a definite connection and unity, a certain consistency in our conception of it, an assurance and lack of resistance in the surrender of the Ego to this conception, which may rest upon particular reasons, but is not explained by them'.

In another source, Simmel (1950, p. 318) describes trust as 'an antecedent or subsequent form of knowledge' that is 'intermediate between knowledge and ignorance about a man'. Complete knowledge or ignorance would eliminate the need for or possibility of trust. He explains that there is a type of trust that stands outside the categories of knowledge and ignorance. Accordingly, trust combines weak inductive knowledge with some mysterious, unaccountable faith: 'On the other hand, even in the social forms of confidence, no matter how exactly and intellectually grounded they may appear to be, there may yet be some additional affective, even mystical, "faith" of man in man'. Anthony Giddens (1990) recognizes that Simmel believes that trust differs from weak inductive knowledge and he strongly supports the view that trust 'presumes a leap to commitment, a quality of "faith" which is irreducible' (Giddens, 1991, p. 19).

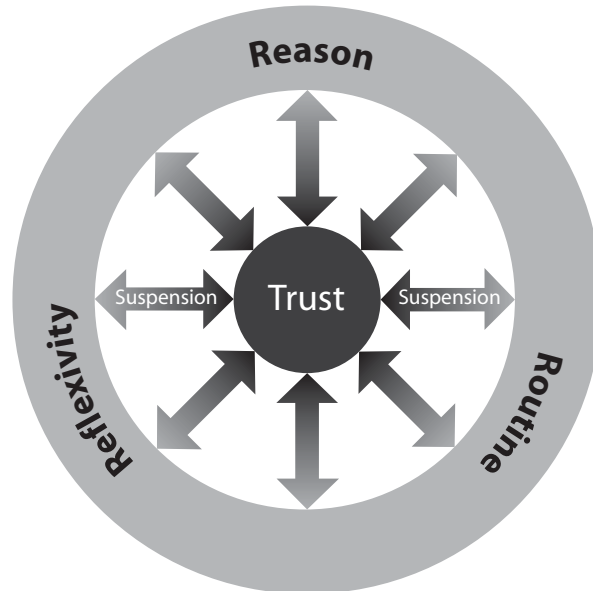


Figure 5.1 The Trust Wheel – An Integrative Framework

In the remainder of this chapter, I will analyse the meaning of the ‘leap of faith’ as the essential feature of trust. A rather extreme and, for most of us, highly disconcerting notion of the leap of faith appears in Søren Kierkegaard’s work, in particular when he discusses Abraham’s decision to sacrifice his son Isaac by God’s will (Kierkegaard, [1843] 1985, see also below). However, sociologists such as Anthony Giddens (1991), Adam Seligman (1997) and Piotr Sztompka (1999) refer to the leap of faith in less existentialist terms and it has even found its way into organization theory (for example Bradach and Eccles, 1989; Zaheer et al., 1998). Although the image of the leap of faith is a very fortunate one since it connotes agency without suggesting perfect control or certainty, I prefer to speak of ‘suspension’ as the process that enables actors to deal with irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability. Suspension is the essence of trust, because trust as a state of positive expectation of others can only be reached when reason, routine and reflexivity are combined with suspension.

At this point, suspension is only a vague notion and in the following sections I will suggest a number of ways to give more concrete meaning

to it. However, an integrative framework illustrating how suspension connects trust and the bases for trust can already be introduced here (Figure 5.1). In this visualization, trust is the hub of a wheel surrounded by reason, routine and reflexivity in the rim. Suspension is depicted as the spokes that connect hub and rim.

It should be clear immediately that the 'Trust Wheel' is no more than a simple heuristic. However, even this simple visual expresses a number of abstract ideas that might inspire further theorizing. For example, trust corresponds via suspension with reason, routine and reflexivity as bases for trust. This means also that trust is not identical to nor directly connected with these trust bases. And, without suspension, the bases for trust cannot lead to trust. The Trust Wheel implies feedback mechanisms, suggesting that, when trust is reached, this will have an effect on the trust bases, too. There is learning. Moreover, reason, routine and reflexivity are connected and may interact. They may also vary in the degree of influence that they have on trust, and they could reinforce each other or compensate for each other.

These are merely tentative propositions emerging from the framework and the concept of trust suggested so far. It can be summarized as follows: trust is an ongoing process of building on reason, routine and reflexivity, suspending irreducible social vulnerability and uncertainty *as if* they were favourably resolved, and maintaining thereby a state of favourable expectation towards the actions and intentions of more or less specific others.

It is clear that suspension is at the heart of this concept and that the wheel will fall apart unless we get a better notion of this 'mystical' (Simmel) element. I suggest three ways of coming to terms with suspension. First, I will return to the idea that trust implies an 'as-if attitude'. I will show that 'as if' is a rather common expression in the literature on trust which, however, is generally taken far too lightly. Is trust essentially a form of fiction if it is reached on an as-if basis? Second, the term 'bracketing' is common in phenomenology and it expresses a kind of temporary blending out. Perhaps in trust uncertainty and vulnerability are bracketed, but how is this achieved? Third, trust might be a matter of willpower and, more specifically, William James' notion of the will to believe could be instructive. The leap of faith is evident here but where does the will come from? In the last part of this chapter, I will review empirical work to date that gives evidence of suspension in practice. Can we observe leaps of faith in real life? How important are they? This section also prepares the ground for the following chapters on studying and experiencing trust.