

Chapter 1

Institutional Trust: An Introduction

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In developing the materials for the symposium on which the present volume is based—the 62nd Annual Nebraska Symposium on Motivation—we needed to create a graphic for advertising and publicity purposes. It was surprisingly difficult to come up with something that evoked the multifarious facets of institutional trust (i.e., trust in institutions); Fig. 1.1 shows the final product. One of the reasons we chose it is that it incorporates elements of both interpersonal trust (Does he trust her? Does she trust him?) and institutional trust, suggested by the columns in the background. These columns are meant to represent a generic institution; it could be a courthouse, a government agency, a legislative branch, a university administration building, or even a private business like a bank. Of course, not all institutions have a physical manifestation; some are more conceptual (e.g., the Internet, the media, science). Institutions also frequently have authority over the lives of ordinary citizens. This volume explores the role of trust in motivating individuals to cooperate and comply with institutions.

Trusting an Institution

What does it mean to trust an institution, as opposed to an individual? Suppose that the couple shaking hands in Fig. 1.1 is engaging one another on the steps of a Capitol: The woman is a state legislator, and the man is a citizen who came to listen

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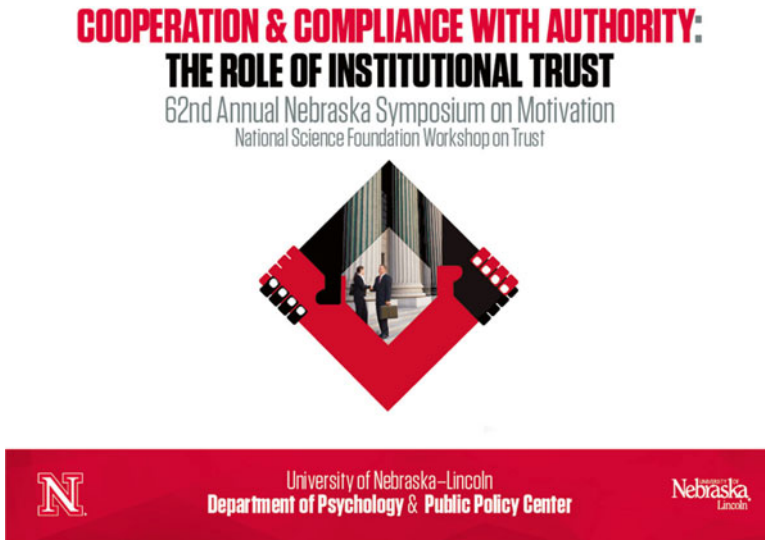


Fig. 1.1 A visual representation of institutional trust

to a hearing about some pending legislation. Is trusting her as an individual legislator different from trusting the state’s legislature as a general entity or trusting the “role” of a legislator? Does it matter whether he has had dealings with the legislature before? Is his attitude toward the state legislature likely to be the same as his attitude toward the U.S. Congress, or other branches of government, such as the governor who might (or might not) sign the pending law; local, state, and federal courts that may be called on to interpret the law; the police who may be required to enforce the law; or a business sector that might need to alter its practices to comply with the law?

These are just some of the kinds of questions covered in the present volume. Additional questions include: What *is* trust? What are its antecedents and consequences? How should we measure it? What model best explains trust and changes in trust? Is trust the same across individuals, institutions, societies, and time? Needless to say, the book does not provide definitive answers to these questions, but it does offer clear suggestions for how to think about and research them, which is the first step toward answering these critical questions, and all the authors in this volume support their perspectives with an abundance of data.

Some of the chapters address interpersonal trust—that is, trust between individual persons—but the overarching focus is on trust in institutions themselves. Trust in others as well as in institutions has been on the decline in recent years (Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014). Because institutions are necessarily comprised of individuals, the two forms of trust are intertwined (Möllering, 2014; Williamson, 1993). Nonetheless, the two forms of trust are separable to some extent. At the very least, they are separable in that they refer to different levels of analysis—trust in an individual versus a group of individuals—but they also seem to differ qualitatively.

In the constellation of public and private institutions, trust toward governmental institutions has been studied extensively, perhaps none as much in the U.S. as the federal Supreme Court (see Chapter “Legitimacy Is for Losers: The Interconnections of Institutional Legitimacy, Performance Evaluations, and the Symbols of Judicial Authority”). Individual justices come and go—albeit not very frequently—yet the Supreme Court as an institution endures. One’s trust in Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg or Justice Antonin Scalia almost certainly influences one’s trust in the Court as a whole; yet trust in the Court, often referred to as the Court’s legitimacy, transcends opinions about individual justices.¹ Similarly, one’s trust in President Barack Obama is related to, yet distinct from, one’s trust in the Presidency itself (see Chapter “Political Trust in Polarized Times”).

Even if many would claim to have little direct contact with governmental agencies, most citizens have had at least some experience with law enforcement; and even if not with tax collection personnel, at least with a tax collection agency. Virtually all of us have extensive experience with schools, a distinct type of public institution, even if we have not had direct experiences with City Hall, the courts, state and federal legislatures, and so on. Furthermore, media portrayals of various institutions and their representatives provide us with a sense of experiencing those institutions even in the absence of direct and personal interaction. It would be impossible to list all of the institutions that we observe or have experience with on a regular basis and that inspire varying levels of trust. Table 1.1 contains a partial list of institutions on which trust research has been conducted. The category of governmental institutions includes

Table 1.1 An incomplete list of trusted (or not) institutions

Government
Courts (state and federal, trial and appellate, international)
Law-making bodies (municipal, state, federal)
Executives (mayor, governor, president)
Law enforcement (police, prosecutors)
Regulatory agencies (Internal Revenue Service, natural resource agencies)
Other public (or quasi-public) institutions
Education providers (K-12, higher education)
Organized religion (churches, synagogues, mosques)
Mass media (print, TV, Hollywood, Internet)
Scientists (American Medical Association, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
Private sector
Employers (large and small businesses)
Providers of goods/services (for-profit companies interacting with consumers)

¹Of some interest is that although those who trust Justice Ginsburg might seem to be different people than those who trust Justice Scalia, these two justices apparently delight and trust in one another quite deeply, despite their ideological and jurisprudential differences (Rosen, 2007).

judicial, legislative, and executive branches at all levels. For example, research exists on trust in trial courts (see Chapter “Who Trusts the Trial Courts, To What Extent, and Why?”), appellate courts (see Chapter “Legitimacy Is for Losers: The Interconnections of Institutional Legitimacy, Performance Evaluations, and the Symbols of Judicial Authority”), and even international tribunals (e.g., McMahon & Miller, 2014). Considerable research has been done on trust in law enforcement (see Chapter “On the Dual Motivational Force of Legitimate Authority”), in large part because of the close connection between trust in the police and compliance with the law (e.g., Tyler, 2006).

The next category, of other public (or quasi-public) institutions, includes institutions that have some governmental component, but the state element tends to be more diffuse. As institutions, they are also harder to compartmentalize. For example, science is more of a process, engaged in by a diverse array of disciplines, than it is a single monolithic institution; nonetheless, there are both public (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and private (e.g., the American Medical Association) scientific organizations. Moreover, trust in the scientific enterprise and other kinds of experts is a measurable construct (or perhaps constructs) that can be raised or lowered depending on a number of factors (see Chapter “The Epistemic Contract: Fostering an Appropriate Level of Public Trust in Experts”).

Finally, people interact with private institutions in a number of capacities. They work for organizations that can have anywhere from a few employees to many thousands, and employees’ trust in the organization has significant consequences for the organization’s success, as well as the employees’ wellbeing (Colquitt, Scott, & Lepine, 2007; Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). They also deal with institutions when they consume products or services. Because consumers have choice, companies compete for their business, and presenting a trustworthy image is a large part of many companies’ marketing efforts. One reason Apple is such a successful company is that consumers trust it more than other electronics manufacturers (e.g., it was recently #10 on *Entrepreneur*’s list of the 120 most trusted brands, between Southwest Airlines and Whole Foods; <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/232389>).

As this incomplete list of institutions makes clear, there are many complexities to and consequences of institutional trust. It promotes democracy, assures effective governance, facilitates societal interactions, and optimizes organizational productivity. Erik Erikson (1950) identified basic trust versus basic mistrust as the critical conflict that newborn infants must resolve for normal, healthy development. Trust, or the lack thereof, can have important consequences not only for the individual, but for society as well. At the individual level, trust has both psychological (e.g., health and wellbeing) and behavioral (e.g., cooperation and compliance with authorities, rewarding interpersonal interactions) effects. It can even promote civic engagement (Gastil, Deess, Weiser, & Simmons, 2010). At the societal level, trust contributes to social capital, such as the effective and efficient provision of social services, productivity in the public and private sectors, public safety, and citizens’ overall standard of living (e.g., Fukuyama, 1996).

Trust is an appropriate topic for a symposium series concentrating on motivation because it raises issues of both motivation and emotion. Specifically, notions of

trust and legitimacy motivate individuals to behave in a manner they deem fair or appropriate when responding to governmental authority (e.g., appearing in court, following police directives, adhering to regulations, etc.); or, alternatively, to disobey authorities when they lack trust or experience distrust. Individuals often have an emotional response to institutions with authority over their lives (e.g., city government, the Supreme Court), with the specific nature and intensity of that emotion likely depending on the extent to which they perceive the institutions as trustworthy, legitimate, or fair (see Chapter “Creating Legitimacy: The Interrelated Roles of Justice and Trust”).

Disciplinary and Semantic Considerations

Given the wide range of institutions for which trust has been studied, it should come as no surprise that important research and commentary is found in literatures that focus on issues ranging from politics and economics to natural resources, from legislatures to executive branch agencies, from brick and mortar businesses to online commerce, from health and medicine to schools, from international development to terrorism, and so on (for review, see Bachmann & Zaheer, 2006, 2013; Lyon, Möllering, & Saunders, 2012; Möllering, 2006). Trust is defined and measured differently in different disciplines, and at times even within the same discipline, which makes it difficult to develop integrative models and theories (see Chapter “Would Trust by Any Other Name Smell as Sweet? Reflections on the Meanings and Uses of Trust Across Disciplines and Context”; Shockley, Neal, PytlíkZillig, & Bornstein, *in press*). For example, McEvily and Tortoriello (2011) identified a total of 129 unique measures of trust in 171 papers published in the organizational trust literature from 1962 to 2010. Some of the measures were unidimensional, whereas others were multidimensional (on the dimensionality of trust-related constructs, see Hamm et al., 2011, 2013); the majority of measures were replicated in few, if any, studies (see also Earle, 2010).

Among the more common constructs associated with trust are notions of confidence, legitimacy, and justice in its various manifestations (i.e., procedural, distributive, interpersonal, organizational, etc.; see, e.g., Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Hamm et al., 2011; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Yet even then, the precise nature of the relationships is far from clear (see Chapters “Would Trust by Any Other Name Smell as Sweet? Reflections on the Meanings and Uses of Trust Across Disciplines and Context” and “Creating Legitimacy: The Interrelated Roles of Justice and Trust”). Moreover, although trust research draws on diverse disciplines, the work is more often *multidisciplinary* (with parallel efforts in multiple disciplines) than it is truly *interdisciplinary* (with cross-disciplinary collaborations). Compared to traditional, “monodisciplinary” research, or even multidisciplinary research, interdisciplinary research offers a number of advantages, for science, society, and researchers themselves (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013; Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research, 2004). Specifically, it produces better

science, in the sense of being more innovative and having a greater impact; it yields better practical applications and facilitates solutions to real-world problems; it has a higher rate of obtaining research funding; it is more gratifying to scientists themselves; and it is more efficient, in that it avoids redundancy due to researchers from multiple disciplines reinventing the wheel (Bornstein, [in press](#); Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research, 2004; Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007).

The present volume, which contains contributions by psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists, works toward the important goal of integrating empirical approaches to trust from various disciplines (Li, 2007). To extend the interdisciplinary conversation still further, the 62nd Nebraska Symposium on Motivation was followed by a National Science Foundation-funded workshop on trust. The workshop included additional social scientists, as well as scholars from health care, social work, law, public administration, information science, and natural resources, in addition to practitioners (doctors, lawyers, public officials—even members of the U.S. Armed Forces) who deal with trust “in the trenches.” Many of the papers from the workshop will be published in a companion volume to the present one (Shockley et al., [in press](#)).

In part because of the many disciplines doing research on trust, people—both researchers and the public—talk about trust in different ways. The large number of trust-related terms and constructs, such as those identified by McEvily and Tortoriello (2011), shows that the language of trust is often diffuse and imprecise (Williamson, 1993; see Chapter “Trust as a Leap of Hope for Transaction Value: A Two-Way Street Above and Beyond Trust Propensity and Expected Trustworthiness”). This became apparent during the Symposium in an interesting but somewhat unusual manner. One of the speakers had a sign language interpreter, which the university routinely provides at public events when a prospective audience member requests one in advance. After the presentation, during the question-and-answer period, someone directed a question to the interpreter—namely, what is the sign for trust? She demonstrated the sign, which looked sort of like someone grabbing onto a rope with two hands—as in, “I trust you to pull me up.” She commented that the sign for “faith” was identical.

This observation led to a fascinating discussion of the terms used for trust in different languages and the psychometric implications of linguistic variations. For example, the speaker (Peter Li), who is fluent in Chinese, commented that in that language, the word for “trust” is the same as the word for “being trusted.” Quite possibly, these (and many other) linguistic variations underlie or reflect some of the cross-cultural and cross-national differences in levels of trust and related constructs like justice (e.g., Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007). For example, would trust in an institution (e.g., the police) be more or less when the word connotes faith than when it does not? What are the implications of blurring the distinction between agent and object, between having trust and being trusted? In many cases the act of trusting implies that the trustee is trustworthy (i.e., worthy of the trustor’s trust); but when the trustee is in fact not trustworthy, work might be necessary to repair the misplaced trust. In addition, trust need not be reciprocal (see Chapter “Would Trust by Any Other Name Smell as Sweet? Reflections on the Meanings and Uses of Trust Across Disciplines and Context”).

Overview of the Book

Trust is a burgeoning and vibrant research area. As our discussion provided above indicates, the topic has garnered significant interest in numerous disciplines and has important real-world implications. In addition, the trust research community is making significant organizational strides. The First International Network on Trust (FINT), which is affiliated with the European Group of Organizational Studies, the European Academy of Management, and the Academy of Management, is about 14 years old and sponsors regular conferences. The *Journal of Trust Research*, edited by Peter Li (a contributor to the present volume), began publication in 2011, and other important books on the topic have been published in the past decade (e.g., Bachmann & Zaheer, 2006, 2013; Lyon et al., 2012). No single book could possibly cover it all, but the present volume offers a sampling of research on institutional trust, drawing on several disciplines and conducted by leading scholars.

The next two chapters confront the big ideas of trust and set out different positions. David Schoorman, Mallory Wood, and Christina Breuer (Chapter “Would Trust by Any Other Name Smell as Sweet? Reflections on the Meanings and Uses of Trust Across Disciplines and Context”) utilize the theoretical framework initially articulated in 1995 by Schoorman and his colleagues (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; see also Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). They contend that trust is a relational construct, characterized by the trustor’s willingness to be vulnerable to a trustee (the trustee can be another person or it can be an organization). Their chapter presents the reasons why placing the construct of vulnerability at the core of trust is theoretically and practically useful (e.g., it leads to a clarification of antecedents to—as opposed to aspects of—trust; it helps to clarify why trust is domain specific; it clarifies the role of risk in trust; it predicts when broken trust can be repaired and when it cannot; etc.), and they argue that adopting this approach to conceptualizing trust allows for the integration and differentiation of much of the trust research literature. In their chapter, Schoorman, Wood, and Breuer also present various definitions of trust and the constructs that have been used to operationalize trust across the social sciences.

Peter Li (Chapter “Trust as a Leap of Hope for Transaction Value: A Two-Way Street Above and Beyond Trust Propensity and Expected Trustworthiness”) characterizes the branch of trust theory promoted by Schoorman and others as “trust-as-attitude.” Li finds this perspective “problematic because it suffers from (1) a lack of focus on the context of relationship for trust, (2) a lack of differentiation between the perspective of trustor and trustee, (3) a lack of understanding about trust as a two-way street with the proactive interaction between trustor and trustee, (4) a lack of attention about the shadow of the future for trust, and (5) a lack of appreciation of vulnerability as opportunity (the defining nature of trust) for cooperative creation of transaction value (the unique role of trust)”. Instead, and in order to answer critical questions that he poses, Li argues for “trust-as-choice,” which he characterizes as a “fundamentally different construct of trust”. His chapter is devoted to detailing trust-as-choice and arguing for its benefits. In addition, Li provides research considerations and an agenda for the future.

Thus, Schoorman et al. and Li return to the historical practice for the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation as a forum to debate competing theoretical perspectives on psychological phenomena. The following chapters look at trust-related issues in greater detail. For example, in Karen Hegtvedt's Chapter "Creating Legitimacy: The Interrelated Roles of Justice and Trust," she examines legitimacy in depth. She "tackles the puzzle of the interrelationships among justice, trust, and legitimacy," noting that "[e]ach may function as an antecedent or consequence of the other, within complex social contexts characterized by uncertainty and risk, variation in power positions and dynamics, and group identities and intergroup dynamics". Hegtvedt relies on fundamental sociological and social psychological theories, with particular emphasis on social identity-based and resource models of justice processes, to explain the creation of legitimacy.

James Gibson's Chapter "Legitimacy Is for Losers: The Interconnections of Institutional Legitimacy, Performance Evaluations, and the Symbols of Judicial Authority" also examines legitimacy. Gibson analyzes *institutional legitimacy* in the context of the U.S. Supreme Court. Gibson concentrates on the sources of the Court's legitimacy. He shows that even though as citizens, we may have policy disagreements with the Court, our dissatisfaction with case outcomes—even highly charged cases—does not undermine our support for the Court. Support for the Supreme Court appears to be driven more by "symbols of judicial authority" rather than by case decisions. Gibson argues information-processing rooted theories have great promise to guide social scientific understanding of the ways in which legitimacy is sustained by the Court.

The chapter "Who Trusts the Trial Courts, To What Extent, and Why?," by David Rottman, examines the sources of trust in trial courts. Rottman notes the difference between trust in distal courts—most notably the U.S. Supreme Court—and in the trial courts with which we can interact as litigants, defendants, witnesses, or jurors. He directs our attention to the importance of three features that characterize trial courts: their local identity, their depiction in the mass media, and, above all, the direct experience the majority of us have had with a trial court. Rottman provides evidence to show that perceptions of procedural justice are critical to understanding trust in trial courts. In addition, Rottman shows that the public's perceptions of trial courts, despite personal experiences, are also strongly influenced by the entertainment media's depictions, ranging from finely detailed, fictional portrayals to so-called "reality" television. This unusual circumstance of being part of American culture makes studying the courts a unique challenge, Rottman advises, different from studying trust in other institutions. In addition, evidence suggests that the influence on trust from both direct experience and media representations is finely tuned, dependent on the specifics of a court experience and the manner in which information about courts reaches a member of the public.

The next chapter, "On the Dual Motivational Force of Legitimate Authority" by Jonathan Jackson, moves the discussion from the perceptions of legal institutions to cooperation behavior with legal authorities. Tom Tyler's work on cooperation with the law has dominated the field (e.g., Tyler, 2006); Jackson provides a nuanced view of cooperation that draws out the critical role of moral values. Morality (particularly

normative alignment, that is, a shared sense of right and wrong) is highly correlated with the duty to obey a legitimate authority, claims Jackson, but it is useful to understand the basic role of morality both for explanatory purposes and its implications for legal socialization.

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, Dona-Gene Barton, and Michael Wagner (Chapter “Political Trust in Polarized Times”) turn our attention to the political process, a historically rich area in which to examine institutional trust. It would be beneficial for democracy if trust in government endures even in the context of political polarization. Gibson (in Chapter “Legitimacy Is for Losers: The Interconnections of Institutional Legitimacy, Performance Evaluations, and the Symbols of Judicial Authority”) shows we are not so sensitive to policy decisions promulgated by the Supreme Court, but Theiss-Morse and her colleagues show that political policies and decisions polarize the American public not only in current times but for ages. Using current as well as prior research, the authors demonstrate that trust-in-government influences and is influenced by political policies and decisions, as well as the ways that these policies and decisions are messaged to the public. The chapter concludes with an appeal for more focus on political trust dynamics from social science.

The book concludes with Robert MacCoun’s (Chapter “The Epistemic Contract: Fostering an Appropriate Level of Public Trust in Experts”) examination of trust in contexts that are of special interest to many readers of the *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* series, that is, trust in science and scientists. Historically, the public’s trust has been fairly high in science and scientists. Recently, however, trust appears to be declining. MacCoun argues, “We should want citizens to trust experts...but only when the experts *should* be trusted”. He posits an “epistemic contract” for the appropriate trust relationship between science/scientists and the public. MacCoun believes the appropriate trust relationship “requires an effort from both sides. Experts have to earn trust, and consumers need to learn that experts can be trusted”, and the chapter gives guidance on how to achieve a healthy stasis.

The present volume, with diverse viewpoints representing empirical work in a number of different disciplines, contributes to ongoing efforts to integrate research on institutional trust. The topic spans an impressive array of institutions, trust in which has important consequences for individuals, the institutions themselves, and society at large. We hope that the volume facilitates future research on institutional trust, as well as policy efforts to increase public trust in institutions—but only, of course, when that trust is deserved.

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