Special Issue Call for Organization Studies

Trust in Uncertain Times

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Motivation

Trust has become one of the most widely researched topics in organization studies (de Jong, et al., 2017). Often broadly understood as the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to the actions of another party (Mayer, et al., 1995; Rousseau, et al., 1998), trust plays a central role in virtually all intra- and inter-organizational interactions. Prior research suggests that trust can alleviate concerns of opportunism, which reduces inter-partner conflict and transaction costs (Anderson, et al., 2017; Zaheer, et al., 1998).

Although the study of trust represents a long-standing area of inquiry in organization studies, several recent technological advancements and geopolitical developments have dramatically changed the landscape in which trust is embedded, pointing to the need for a re-examination and extension of earlier accounts. Perhaps most notably, the ongoing Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2017) is fundamentally altering both economic transactions and social exchange (Meyer & Quattrone, 2021). Supported by unprecedented degrees of connectivity and processing of vast amounts of data (Hanelt, et al., 2021), digital technologies provide significant opportunities to re-design work and develop more open, flexible, and scalable organizing; however, their fast development and complexity also create considerable uncertainty for organizations. Digital technologies are transforming the nature of human interactions (Iansiti & Lakhani, 2020), with profound impacts on organizations, organizing, and the organized (Alaimo, forthcoming). Specifically, there are reasons to believe that digital technologies may cause trust to become more institution-based (Lumineau, et al., 2020), with formal mechanisms substituting for a history of interpersonal exchange as the source of trust. For instance, digital platforms facilitate trust between strangers (Abrahao, et al., 2017; Kuwabara, 2015; Mikołajewska-Zając, et al., forthcoming), blockchains can automate agreements with unknown partners (Hsieh, et al., 2018; Lumineau, et al., 2021), and artificial intelligence (AI) helps in assessing partners' trustworthiness (Liu, et al., 2014). As a result, trust may become comparatively less personal (Seidel, 2018; Vanhala, et al., 2011) and more embedded in the institutional environment (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011).

These technological developments come amidst unprecedented levels of geopolitical uncertainty and an accelerated decline of trust in institutions (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Thought of as a relic from the past, a new cold war seems to be possible again. The Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplifies how key tenets of the economic world order—such as globalisation, free trade, and democracy—are more fragile than many assumed. What is more, China has emerged as a new superpower that is increasingly demanding its share of the global system of power and influence, leading to tensions and new challenges. The world has been massively shaken by a pandemic that has demonstrated the instability of trust in the absence of strong institutions (Fancourt, et al., 2020) while highlighting the critical need for various forms of trust in times of distress (Schilke, et al., 2021). In parallel, climate change will force humanity to completely rethink our energy sourcing, with a substantial impact on almost every industry, transportation, and private consumption, and trust in reliable institutions may represent a critical mechanism supporting pro-environmental behaviour that could address this challenge (Smith & Mayer, 2018).

Our theories of trust in organizations and processes of organizing need to reflect these transformative changes. Against this background, we believe it is both important and timely to reassess the role of trust in intra- and inter-organizational settings to better understand how relevant contemporary developments affect and are affected by trust. The ongoing disruptive technological, political, and societal changes that are affecting organizations call for revisiting the very concept of trust, along with its consequences and the processes that underly its development, maintenance, and repair.

Objectives

The objective of this Special Issue is to serve as a focal point for theory development on and empirical insights into the various ways in which trust and uncertainty intersect, with a special emphasis on the role of institutions in explaining the interface between the two.

Scope

The Special Issue invites submissions that make substantial contributions to our understanding of trust in organized settings.

We embrace a wide variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. The range of theoretical orientations may include institutional, structurationist, ethnomethodological, socio-material, phenomenological, and beyond. Diverse methodological approaches are welcome, including case studies, experiments, secondary data analyses, and surveys. Purely conceptual papers, empirical investigations, and combinations of theoretical and empirical research will also be considered.

Our interest is directed toward trust at various analytical levels (i.e., micro, meso, and macro-levels), as long as organizations or organizing have a central place in the analysis. At the micro level, for instance, we find it worthwhile to revisit the role of 'facework' (Giddens, 1990), boundary work (Weber, et al., forthcoming), and rituals (Collins, 2004; Krishnan, et al., 2021) in

organizational settings, as such analyses will be clearly geared toward a better understanding of the relationship between trust and institutional arrangements in uncertain contexts.

Below, we list a total of nine exemplary research topics that we believe will provide useful springboards for contributions that fit the scope of the special issue. However, submissions do not have to be limited to these themes.

Potential Research Topics

- **Uncertainty and trust.** Uncertainty, in its various forms, is inseparably linked to the concept of trust. Uncertainty is often thought of as a precondition for trust, in that trust tends to be more relevant when uncertainty is high (Deutsch, 1958; Yamagishi, et al., 1998). Yet, it is precisely under conditions of high uncertainty when trust is particularly difficult to produce, given the trustor's difficulty to reliably predict the trustee's level of trustworthiness. Thus, many forms of trust production, and in particular institution-based trust production mechanisms, are fundamentally aimed at reducing uncertainty (Bachmann, 2001; Zucker, 1986). Taken together, these two positions result in an intriguing paradox (Krishnan, et al., 2006; Yamagishi, 2011): trust is more important when uncertainty is high but its presence reduces this very uncertainty. Given their complex interplay, we need greater insight into how different forms of uncertainty and trust coevolve and are reciprocally intertwined.

- **A broader understanding of institution-based trust.** Institutions are central to prominent accounts of trust production (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Fuglsang & Jagd, 2015; Möllering, 2006; Nooteboom, 2007; Owen & Currie, forthcoming; Schilke, et al., 2017; Zucker, 1986), but most of these discussions have focused on a rather limited set of institutions, such as reputation systems and intermediaries. Broadly understood as taken-for-granted, normatively sanctioned role structures and interaction orders (Ocasio, et al., 2017), institutions are everywhere (albeit certainly not everything, Ocasio & Gai, 2020). They exist at several levels of analysis—ranging from dyadic relationships to organizations, inter-organizational networks, organizational fields, societies, and the world system. Armed with this insight, we need to expand our repertoire of institutions that shape the production of trust in a wide variety of contexts. Embracing the contingent nature of trust production, we need to address the following question: What types of institutions effectively support or restrict which types of trust in what settings? How is trust in one institution intertwined with trust in another institution?

- **Platform-enabled institutions and trust.** It is also important to explore the ways institutions may serve as substitutes (rather than bases) for trust by eliminating the vulnerability of actors that is often seen as a defining feature of trust (Cook, 2015). One case in point are platform-enabled peer-to-peer reputation systems, which have emerged as important online institutions shaping exchanges through mechanisms such as peer feedback (Bauman & Bachmann, 2017; Kuwabara, 2015). Do such institutional arrangements indeed foster trust, or do they safeguard exchange partners against opportunism by enforcing cooperation? Under what conditions can platform-based institutions give rise to trusting communities?

- **Micro-level mechanisms of the trust and institutions nexus**. Institutions are a key source of trust production, but the precise mechanisms through which they create trust are largely unknown (Zucker & Schilke, 2020). Why do people trust individuals and organizations that are institutionally endorsed? In particular, what role does legitimacy— as a key institutional process—play in institution-based trust production? Conversely, what are the mechanisms through which trust affects actors' engagement with institutions?

- **Trust of meso-level institutions.** The notion that institutions can be a target of trust is largely uncontroversial; however, the questions of whether and in what ways formal institutions—including organizations—have the capacity to place trust in other actors have often been ignored (but see Sydow, 2006). We need a better theoretical account for elaborating organizations' capacity to trust that avoids merely anthropomorphizing collective entities. In what ways is trust placed by collective actors similar to and different from trust placed by individuals? Are the drivers of individuals' trust generalizable to those of organizations' trust?

- **Macro-level institutions and trust.** There are substantial differences among institutions embedded in distinct national environments (Henisz & Swaminathan, 2008; North, 1990); similarly, trust is known to differ markedly across nations (Lane & Bachmann, 1996; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Nonetheless, a systematic account of how country-level institutions shape trust at the individual and organizational levels is largely lacking. Thus, we ask these questions: Which types of regulatory, normative, and cognitive institutions at the country level can explain generalized trust? Moreover, is there a reciprocal effect of generalized trust on the emergence of country-level institutions?

- **Institutionalisation of trust.** In some cases, the amount of trust placed is the result of a deliberate and reflective cognitive process that systematically weighs the pros and cons (Hardin, 1992); however, in many other cases, trust represents a rather automatic and highly institutionalised process (Kroeger, 2011, 2013; Schilke, et al., 2013). We need to know more about this institutionalised side of trust—under what circumstances it is likely to dominate and what (positive and negative) consequences it may entail. Particularly useful would be a process-oriented approach (e.g., Brattström, et al., 2019; Weber, et al., forthcoming) that identifies relevant stages in the institutionalisation of trust—for instance, ranging from habitualisation to objectification to sedimentation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996) and deinstitutionalisation (Clemente & Roulet, 2015). What are the mechanisms explaining the shift from one stage to another, and what conditions affect the pace at which the institutionalisation process may unfold in organizations and society as a whole?

- **Erosion of trust in institutions.** Institutions that enjoy public trust are a bedrock of society as we know it, yet trust in institutions is in stark decline, raising concerns about the rise of populism and conspiracy theories (Hosking, 2019). The reasons for this downward trend have remained largely elusive and require greater elaboration. Going

beyond interactions between citizens and the state, trust in public institutions has important trickle-down effects on trust in private and public organizations. Examining the nested nature of these trust relations—that is, how trust in institutions is related to trust in organizations and individuals—provides much potential for approaching trust from a systems perspective that allows for appreciating the relational complexity in trust dynamics in society.

- **Digital technologies and trust.** The decline of trust in institutions has coincided with the advent of digital technologies. Several aspects of digital technologies—including blockchains, big data, and AI—may have critical implications for trust in organizational settings.
    o An increasing number of organizations consider the adoption of *blockchains* for structuring a wide variety of transactions (Lumineau, et al., 2021). In what ways and under which conditions do blockchains complement and/or substitute for trust? And how do blockchains alter the nature of trust if economic actors are no longer directly connected and may not even know each other (Hsieh, et al., 2018)?
    o *Big data* may come with huge benefits for society but also significant potential for misuse (Symons & Alvarado, 2016), and overreliance on big data analytics may transform organizations into near total institutions where conformity is enforced via constant surveillance (Anteby & Chan, 2018; Newlands, 2021). How may trusting communities emerge despite digital surveillance, and how can digital surveillance systems be used in a trustworthy fashion?
    o As *AI* is increasingly taking over decision making within and between organizations (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Kaur, et al., 2022), the trustworthiness of this technology becomes an important issue (Shrestha, et al., 2019; Srinivasan & Chander, 2021). As a result, we need to reassess the age-old question of when opaque technological systems can be (dis)trusted.

Submitting your paper
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