

Kaleidoscopic views of trust

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Introduction

Contexts of trust: a human ecological perspective

From what we have read and discussed so far, it seems to us that there is always a specific context within which we consider moments of trust and trusting. In our project, we have found it illuminating to adopt a human ecology perspective. According to Jackson (2016: 2-3), human ecological or ecosocial systems are:

'(a) set of relationships and interactions among the people, resources, habitats, and other residents of an area for the purpose of living. While all ecosystems are complex adaptive systems that learn to live with, and when necessary adapt to, their environment, the making of meanings and sharing of understandings (learning) are a primary interest and purpose of human ecosocial systems, together with their continuous development and improvement for the purpose of living'.

Although Jackson is particularly concerned with exploring creative pedagogies within Higher Education learning, we suspect that a similarly ecological perspective would be fruitful in enriching our co-inquiry into trust and trusting. Hence an ecological perspective underpins our approach to curating this edition, and it could well be a strand that is worth unravelling further in our [post-publication Gathering](#).

In working together on editing this special edition of *e-O&P*, given our different backgrounds and experiences, we (Rob and Bob) wondered how we might frame this introductory article most helpfully, in a way that honours different intellectual and experiential traditions that have a bearing on trust and trusting.

Having considered a range of possibilities, and acknowledging the influence of notions such as complex responsive processes (e.g. Stacey 2007) and ecological perspectives (e.g. Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bortoft 1998; Jackson 2016), we decided:

- To try to reveal some of the assumptions – both spoken and unspoken - when the words ‘trust’ and ‘trusting’ trip off our tongues;
- To highlight the importance of exploring such innate human forms of relating from a number of different angles, such as – reflexively – how the ‘whole’ of the trusting process is more than the sum of its parts, and how ‘the parts’ are formed by the ‘whole’
- To try to understand better our trusting practices as we trust or do not trust others, including remarking on the experience of co-editing this edition in a spirit of [critical friendship](#) (MacKenzie 2015), when relating with authors, with each other and with others who have been involved in this writing, reading and conversational project.
- To engage in conversations with others about trusting practices, and to invite and facilitate further explorations in a variety of fora, and
- To provide a brief overview of the articles in this edition.

An assumption and some questions

We embarked upon this project of commissioning and editing this special themed issue of *e-O&P* with a shared assumption that trust is an essential feature of hopeful personal and organisational relationships. Yet as soon as we started to think self-consciously about trust, it seemed beyond our comprehension. Questions such as: What is trust? How can it be measured? What are its ‘parts’? How can we improve the quality of trust? all seemed inadequate. Yet, daily, we form trusting relationships, we offer something, we show vulnerability to, and see it in, others. There is clearly a response and context through which trust is either mediated or undermined. Intuitively, we knew that trust is important for us and for those around us. There is fear of being let down, yet a hope that relationships might develop in mutually beneficial ways. And we can envisage that such hopes and fears are mirrored in those with whom we interact. We sense powerfully that – whatever it is - trust is important. If so, can we find helpful ways of talking about and embodying trust? We embarked upon this writing project to see whether – with the contributions of others – we could find some answers.

Trusting as a form of dancing?

Personally, we might reflect on the subject of trust as we interact with others who we are starting to get to know. We would gauge the cues that we embody, see and hear that are inherent in such interactions. We might also consider the context within which we are seeking to trust. At any particular moment, should we trust absolutely, provisionally, or not at all? In embarking on new relationships, it might help to imagine it as akin to engaging with a new dance partner. Initially, we might want to impress the other whilst at the same time remaining cautious in case they tread on our toes. Then, when our dancing routine is perfected, our moves become instinctive.

From an organisational perspective, how can we form more trusting relationships with and between people on a larger scale: teams, departments, organisations, sectors, communities of practice - the mêlée of what aspires to become a thriving society? How can we create, sustain and nourish appropriately trusting relationships? What conversations and actions might we encourage to facilitate this?



[Children dancing in a ring](#) (Der Kinderreigen), 1872: Hans Thomas [1839-1924]. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

Perspectives on trust: a philosophical note

As co-editors, we hope to shine a light on how people talk about trust, and on some of the pitfalls of such conversations, and to suggest different perspectives that might play their part in increasing our understanding and practices of trust. We assume that this understanding can only occur when we acknowledge that we are part of a communal, interactive, emerging process. It seems to us that it might help to think of trusting relationships in two different but related ways. These ways are (1) holistically, in terms of their intuitive essence; and (2) deconstructively, in considering the characteristics that – together - come to make up trust. In this edition, we and other contributors explore how these two connected perspectives might interact and inform each other to enable us to develop a more mature and useful understanding of trust and trusting.

An holistic perspective

A 'big picture' perspective would allow us to view trust's broad brush features, if not its detail. As the American academic and authority on trust Eric Uslaner observes (*pace vegetarians and vegans!*):

Trust is the chicken soup of social life. It brings us all sorts of good things, from a willingness to get involved in our communities to higher rates of economic growth and, ultimately, to satisfaction

with government performance, to making daily life more pleasant. Yet, like chicken soup, it appears to work somewhat mysteriously. It might seem that we can only develop trust in people we know. Yet, trust's benefits come when we put faith in strangers. (Uslaner, 2002).

What can we read into this? Poetically we get it. It conveys that holistic sense of what trust is. There is a sense of movement and connection with the people around us and with those far beyond. We and society at large are at one in a positive endeavour, motivated by faith and hope. Uslaner's reference to chicken soup arises from a distinctive (Jewish) culture, redolent of the author's heritage, faith and values, and of those most immediately around him. But 'community' also embraces people outside of a distinctive cultural grouping, and encompasses people we might call outsiders. Uslaner's reference to mystery implies that we don't know for sure how trust works, and even, perhaps, that we should not enquire too closely. Like a magician's spells, once we know how they work, the magic is lost. Another way of imagining the workings of trust is as if it is glimpsed out of the corner of an eye: we sense it and feel that we know what it, but as soon as our gaze is fixed upon it, its essence disappears.

Explicating trust in this way might suggest that it is impossibly elusive to grasp cognitively, and should not be tampered with. But that would be wrong and unhelpful. Instead, we could try adopting a different approach to identifying its various characteristics.

Some elements and characteristics of trust

What are the essential characteristics of trust? Mayer and others (Mayer et al., 1995) describe trust as a:

... willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party. (Mayer et al., 1995)

Here we are introduced to some component 'parts' of trust and trusting. These include vulnerabilities; the presence of parties; expectations; actions; and processes of sensing, monitoring and controlling – scanning and measurement. The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2014) refers to four 'pillars of trust': benevolence, integrity, predictability and ability. The word 'pillar' has connotations of fixed structure, strength and rigidity. Once trust is 'built', we are protected in what we have created. This view takes little account of a process by which trust is provisional, shifting and under continual negotiation. Somehow, talk of constructed features seems inadequate, conjuring up images of static entities when considered in isolation from a wider and more complex perspective. Nonetheless, the simplistic metaphor of 'pillars' can be seductive, and perhaps it has its uses as a way of communicating about and engaging with the phenomenon.

In our view, it's essential to take account simultaneously of both the 'entirety' and the 'parts' of trust. So next, we focus on how we might consider both aspects together as a distinctive way of understanding it better.

A multi-faceted perspective on trust

Someone who can shine a light on the subject is Henri Bortoft. Bortoft was a student of the quantum physicist David Bohm, and his intellectual curiosity also led him to the early nineteenth century German polymath, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Being a quantum physicist, Bortoft had learnt to become wary of

either/or solutions to problems - a concern illustrated by the popular analogy of [Schrodinger's Cat](#). His project became an investigation into the nature of 'wholeness'. In a chapter called 'Encountering the whole – the Active Absence' he explains:

We cannot know the whole in the way in which we know things because we cannot recognise the whole as a thing. If the whole were available to be recognised in the same way as we recognise the things that surround us, then the whole would be counted among those things as one of them. ... But the wholes come into presence within its parts, and we encounter the whole in the same way as we encounter the parts (Bortoft, 1998, p285).

[Portrait of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#) by Joseph Karl Stieler [1781-1858], Wikimedia Commons



Here, Bortoft is suggesting that the whole has a different quality than its parts, and offers the example of reading a text (an exercise which you yourself might try here). When reading, in moving from a word to a paragraph, to a chapter of a book, a person loses awareness of an individual word or words (unless they make a particularly memorable quote). Yet this is not to say that the words have become nothing:

We do not take the meaning of a sentence to be a word. The meaning of a sentence is no-word. But evidently this is not the same as nothing, for if it were we would never read! The whole presence within parts, but from the standpoint of awareness that grasps the external parts, the whole is an absence. This absence, however, is not the same as nothing. Rather it is an active absence inasmuch as we do not try to be aware of the whole as if we could grasp it like a part, but instead let ourselves be open to be moved by the whole. (1998, p286)

In the context of trust, both the holistic and separate characteristics are simultaneously useful and limiting. We need to grapple with both. The last few words of the previous quotation - 'let ourselves be open to be moved' – merit careful attention. To trust and be trusted is an essential process of movement and engagement which requires a reflexive ability.

Kaleidoscopic shifts in trusting



[Kaleidoscope tube](#); picture by [Rodrigo Nuno Bragança Cunha](#)

In our attempts to understand trust better, we are drawn to the metaphor of playing with a [kaleidoscope](#). We see that kaleidoscopic images are made up of hundreds of reflected shards of coloured glass. However, our attention is drawn to the bigger patterns of colour and uniqueness. We are aware of how the larger picture is formed from the fragments, but this comes to life and patterns change every time it is turned and we sense a process of movement and becoming.



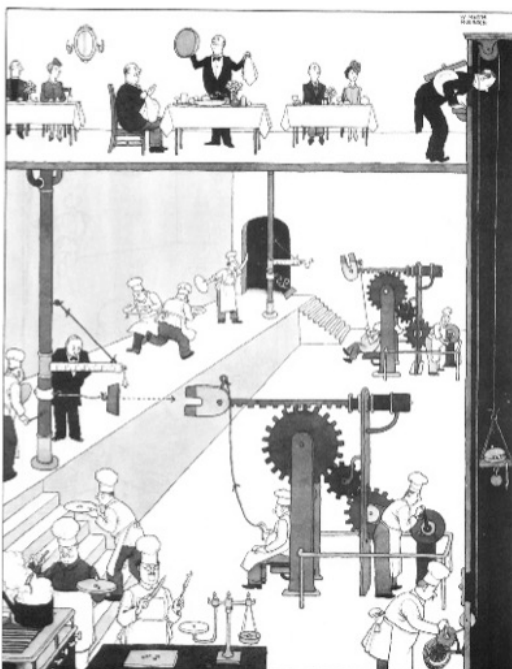
[Kaleidoscope view](#): Picture by [Muu-Karhu](#)

Viewed in this way, developing trust is a heuristic and continuous process of noticing, learning and interaction. We can talk usefully of its constituent parts, but only in the context of a wider picture of forming and movement. In this way, we can accommodate both the metaphors of chicken soup and pillars.

Enhancing the prospects of trusting relationships through co-inquiry

Characteristics of this edition: an overview of each article

A particular strength of AMED's journal *e-O&P* is its eclectic nature. Unlike many journals, we are not wedded to one single style, 'school', methodology or theoretical or ideological perspective, other than seeking to give voice to multiple perspectives and to make more widely available fresh and innovative approaches and conjectures. We are interested in fostering connections between academics and other practitioners, and in illustrating a variety of research methods and practices, as this edition demonstrates. Hence, in this case, we are able to pay attention to different ideas and experiences of trust, and to provide a space to explore both its holistic and deconstructed characteristics, as well as the processes (the turning of the kaleidoscope) of developing those inter-relationships.



[Stretching spaghetti](#): [William Heath Robinson](#)

When we first put out the invitation to write on trust, we did not know if it would strike a chord. Quite soon we had our answer. One of the first responses was from **Bob Whipple** in the USA. Bob works with people to develop trust. Our imagination was immediately caught by Bob's use of an intriguing gadget to communicate insights about trust. To our British minds, it immediately drew us to the madcap inventions of [William Heath Robinson](#). In what other aspects of human interaction might someone come up with a machine to spark important conversations? Yet that is what Bob was drawn to do. And in Bob's article we hear (and see) how such conversations can be enriched through this very physical, tangible approach. We hope that you are similarly intrigued.

Continuing with a conversational theme, **Alison Donaldson** chooses to add life to the subject of trust through literature and stories. In doing so, Alison draws attention to the limitations of analytical frameworks to convey complex human feelings. Literature and stories offer different avenues for exploration, ones that connect their characters' own dilemmas, doubts and vulnerabilities with our own. It is interesting to dwell on the three-way reflective interaction between us as readers, Alison, and the characters in the story she has chosen to explicate. We sense how Alison has been moved in this reflective article, we appreciate the dilemmas of the characters in the stories, and – as readers - we, too, are affected. In describing the power of stories, Alison points out that:

'..., they tend to stimulate associations, insights and feelings in us. As we read, we often compare the events described with our own experience, and this may shift our thinking.'

In this way, Alison explores the nature of knowledge differently, subtly drawing attention to the limitations of the common approach of abstract knowledge, by which we mean insights that imply universal truths irrespective of context. Instead, our attention is drawn to connections, intuitions and imagination between different worlds. (It's worth noting that, previously, Rob worked with Alison on a trust project sponsored by [Roffey Park](#)).

In Alison's article, we hear the story of healthcare CEO who did not have that 'people thing'. This theme is taken up in **Sarah Harvey**'s article, which draws upon Stephen Covey's 'Emotional Bank Account'. We hear Sarah's reflections as an experienced Organisational Development practitioner, as she engages with people who seek to develop more trusting relationships. Trust, she argues, is a fundamental feature that enables those all-important challenging and difficult conversations to occur (a process she refers to as 'savvy conversations'). She points out that 'Whilst busy managers often have good intentions, many have told me that they don't have time for "small-talk"'. Yet these very gestures constitute the glue that holds trusting relationships together.

Louie Gardiner explores her own experiences of trust and mistrust, and explicitly reaches out to us, her readers. As with Sarah Harvey, Louie works with groups and has developed an approach to discussing how we relate to each other that she calls 'P6C'. In a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world, Louie proposes that, in order to develop our ability to progress and thrive, we must hone our reflexive abilities and understanding of the complexity in which we are immersed. She offers us a way of slowing down, thinking and engaging, to consider what we can change, what we cannot, and how we can hold ourselves to account.

Reflecting Louie's VUCA theme, **Paul Levy** considers trust in the context of our evolving digital lives against the backdrop of the 2008 banking crisis and other events that are profoundly shaking the *status quo*. Are we glimpsing beginnings of new approaches of how people might relate and trust each other? Paul introduces us to ideas about 'horizontal trust', the sharing economy, cryptocurrencies, and social movements. Rather than deferring to a higher authority in a vertical, hierarchical relationship, we can negotiate and work through issues of trust ourselves in a community process. As we write this editorial, we are mindful of recent unexpected events in the US, with the election of Donald Trump as the next President. What are the challenges that this raises for what counts as reliable knowledge to make those trusting decisions in what

has been called this '[Post Truth era](#)'? Paul makes a powerful point in stressing the importance of '*access to accurate information, clarity of communication, and the ability to validate that those who are delivering services have relevant skills and knowledge*'. Paul raises some important questions. Yet, in a spirit of co-inquiry, where we are all engaged in a shared process of exploration, Paul enjoins us to remain hopeful.

Peter King addresses trust from yet another angle. In using the ancient cartographer's warning 'Here be dragons!', he takes on the academic establishment, inviting us to glimpse trust differently. We sense trust as a collection of unexamined norms and practices that a community falls into. In so doing, this can harm both the wary traveller or newcomer, and the establishment itself. Peter charts a course through the lure of statistics, culturally-conditioned ways of looking at the world, and the blind spots that these create. His concern is less about 'to trust or not to trust' as conscious decision making, but rather about how we hear of power and long-held tradition, and how these come to exclude, stifle and downplay new and challenging thoughts and ways of relating.

In proposing yet another way of understanding trust, **John Tobin** considers the work of the US pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead. Mead is concerned about what happens as we interact with each other in the hope that greater understanding can lead to improvement. Here, John takes Mead's notion of 'Cult Value' and considers it in relation to trust. The more we speak of trust, the more it develops properties that become unachievable: it becomes a form of external ideal state. But as John points out, that is not all bad. It affects the nature and patterns of conversations whereby we talk and think about trust, and this can be inspirational and helpful. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, it can be draining and destructive. John pays attention to trust as an organisation-wide 'project' of power that consists of different emergent person-to-person interactions as individuals and groups relate to each other.

What might you contribute to this co-inquiry?

Finally, (for the moment), we return to our opening invitation about how – collectively – we might sense the nature of the whole of trust as distinct from its various parts. This edition reflects a number of different views, perspectives, feelings and philosophical arguments. We would be the last to claim that – together – they constitute the final word on the subject. We're eager to know what *you* think. Having read and reflected on some of the text in this edition, how – if at all – do you now think of and experience trust differently? We'd be keen to learn whether - in addressing this question as a co-inquiry - a different form of 'wholeness' of trust might emerge.

A particular feature of several of the articles here is the attention paid to *conversation*. By this means, we can affect, nudge, pay attention to the nature and practices of trust by the way we talk about it and by the connections that we might draw from such interactions to make our understanding even more vivid and embodied. So, as you engage with the ideas articulated in this edition, we would welcome a dialogue with you to explore how your own ideas are developing in this process of shared learning, so that ours, too, can grow. We hope we have an opportunity to do this both in online conversations with you via the Forum that we've created [here](#), and in person at a [post-publication gathering at the University of Chichester](#) in March 2017 (date tbc – possibly on Thursday 9th or 16th).

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