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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2013.822669>

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Citation

Ferrin, Donald Lee. On the institutionalization of trust research and practice: Heaven awaits!. (2013). *Journal of Trust Research*. 3, (2), 146-154. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business.

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SPECIAL FORUM ESSAY

On the institutionalisation of trust research and practice: Heaven awaits!

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(Received 16 June 2013; final version received 24 June 2013)

In this Commentary, I review the progress made by trust scholars toward institutionalising trust research and practice, and also where progress has lagged. I compare the institutionalisation of the trust field to institutionalisation in the leadership, and negotiation & conflict management, fields. I consider factors such as the scale and scope of existing research, recognised relevance to practice, dedicated journals, practitioner and researcher books, established pedagogies, integration of trust into organizational interventions, executive development programmes, and postgraduate and undergraduate business curricula, dedicated Chairs and conferences, established conceptualisations and measures of trust, etc. I conclude that while we have made admirable progress in studying trust as a scientific construct, we have made insufficient progress in applying trust research to practice and teaching, and trust has not yet gained the recognition it needs and deserves in our universities, businesses, governments, and NGOs. I conclude with the hope that academic research on trust continues with the same vigour it has to date, but also that some trust researchers will shift more of their time, effort and resources to trust-related research translations and practice.

Keywords: trust institutionalisation; research; teaching; pedagogy; classes; courses; simulations; cases; practice; measures; interventions; centers; institutes; chairs

It is virtually self-evident that trust research in the organisational sciences has advanced dramatically, in quantity and quality, over the last two decades. However, one might also wonder whether the success we have enjoyed in establishing trust as a field of study and practice – of institutionalising trust – is wholly beneficial. Moreover, given the progress we have made in advancing trust research, it may be worthwhile to pause to consider the ways in which trust has been successfully institutionalised, the ways in which progress has lagged, and the hazards as well as promises of further institutionalisation.

At the June 2012 First International Network on Trust Biennial Workshop in Milan, my colleague Vincenzo Perrone and I participated in a pre-workshop session titled ‘The Institutionalization of Trust Research: Heaven or Hell?’. Subsequently, Peter Ping Li invited the two of us to extend some of our thinking on this topic as commentaries for the *Journal of Trust Research*.

In this commentary, I would like to highlight some of the ways that trust research has developed and become institutionalised, discuss some of the needs and benefits

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of that institutionalisation, and consider the opportunities ahead. In a second commentary, Vincenzo will then discuss some potential hazards of this institutionalisation.

Institutionalisation

First, what do we mean by institutionalisation? For the purposes of this commentary, I use the term 'institutionalised' to refer to the extent and ways in which an academic field has established itself, and is generally recognised by stakeholders, as having long-standing relevance and importance for science and practice. Such institutionalisation can be manifested with a range of indicators such as recognised relevance to practice, scale and scope of research, dedicated journals, practitioner and researcher books, established pedagogies, dedicated chairs and conferences, etc.

Leadership provides one example of a highly institutionalised field. Leadership is generally assumed to be a critical asset of organisations, and organisations that do not have strong leaders and strong leadership development programmes are considered deficient. The field has a long history of research, established leadership theories (transformational, transactional, charismatic, LMX, authentic, shared, etc.), a dedicated journal (*The Leadership Quarterly*), academic organisations and conferences devoted to the topic, frequent journal special issues devoted to leadership, established pedagogies (action learning, leadership cases and simulations, assessment centres), established techniques for measuring leadership behaviours and effectiveness, established institutes and professional services firms devoted to leadership in whole or in part (e.g. the Center for Creative Leadership), many university endowed chairs devoted to leadership, and courses that are among the topics most in demand for executive development programmes and an elemental part of EMBA, MBA and undergraduate business curricula.

Another example of an institutionalised field is negotiation and conflict management. Negotiation skills are considered a critical asset of leaders and managers, and arbitration and mediation processes are firmly established practices for resolving disputes both formally and informally. The field has a long history of research, established negotiation and conflict theories (goal interdependence theory, integrative vs. distributive negotiation, etc.), dedicated journals (*Journal of Conflict Resolution; Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*), countless academic and practitioner books, academic organisations and conferences dedicated to the topic (International Association for Conflict Management), frequent journal special issues devoted to negotiation and conflict, established pedagogies (simulations and case studies), established methods for measuring the creation and division of surplus in a negotiation, numerous institutes and professional services firms devoted to negotiation in whole or in part (e.g. Dispute Resolution Research Center; Program on Negotiation; Karrass), university endowed chairs devoted to negotiation and conflict, and courses that are among the topics most in demand for executive development programmes and an elemental part of EMBA, MBA and undergraduate business curricula.

There are numerous other fields that would be considered highly institutionalised, such as performance management and compensation, personality and selection, organisational attachment, work–life balance and organisational culture.

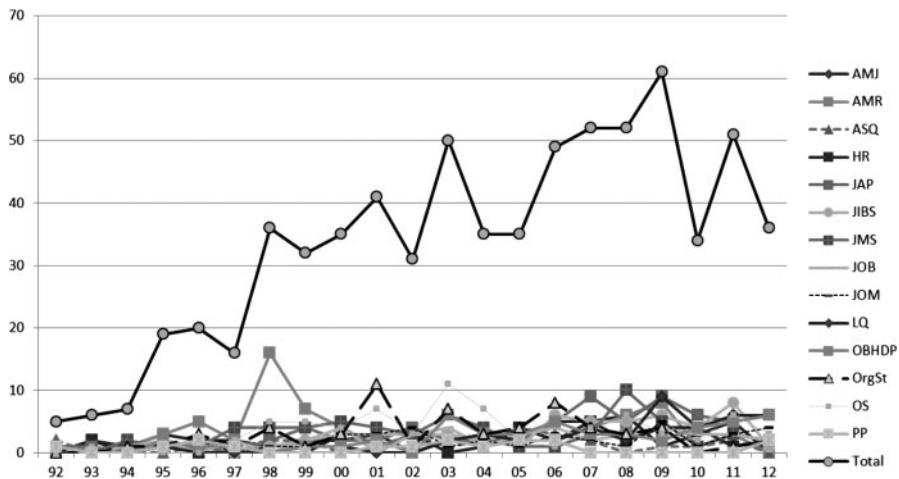


Figure 1. Number of trust articles published in selected OB/IO/HR journals, 1992–Present. Note 1: The figure was prepared by conducting a Social Sciences Citation article for articles having the keyword ‘trust’ published in each specific journal.

Note 2: AMJ = Academy of Management Journal, AMR = Academy of Management Review, ASQ = Administrative Science Quarterly, HR = Human Relations, JAP = Journal of Applied Psychology, JIBS = Journal of International Business Studies, JMS = Journal of Management Studies, JOB = Journal of Organizational Behavior, JOM = Journal of Management, LQ = The Leadership Quarterly, OBHDP = Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, OrgSt = Organisation Studies, OS = Organization Science, PP = Personnel Psychology.

The institutionalisation of trust

Although the trust field has a relatively short history compared to leadership and negotiation/conflict, in many ways the field has already become highly institutionalised (Li, 2012). First and perhaps most obviously, the number of articles published in the field’s top journals has increased dramatically over the last two decades (see Figure 1). With the increase in the number of research articles on trust, one would expect to see a substantial number of review articles – including meta-analytical reviews that quantify the empirical effects in the body of research – and also books summarising and further advancing the field’s knowledge base. This is certainly true in the trust field, with numerous review articles (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Ferrin & Gillespie, 2010; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Kramer, 1999; Kramer & Lewicki, 2010; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006; Searle, Weibel, & Den Hartog, 2011), meta-analytic reviews (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Kong, Dirks, & Ferrin, forthcoming) and academic books (Castaldo, 2007; Cook, Hardin, & Levi, 2005; Fukuyama, 1995; Gambetta & Hamill, 2005; Möllering, 2006; Nooteboom, 2002). These sources signal that the trust field has reached a critical mass at which theoretical and empirical findings are available to address key questions, yet the mass of evidence is also sufficiently large that it needs summarisation and interpretation, and meanwhile there is sufficient replication and consistency of findings in the existing body of research to enable meta-analysis.

This quantity of research also reflects the number of scholars working in the field. Indicative of the degree of institutionalisation in the trust field, we have seen the formation of a membership association of trust scholars (the First International Network on Trust, with its Workshops in Amsterdam (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008), Madrid (2010), Milano (2012) and now Singapore (2013)), website, list-serve and Linked-in Group), the European Group on Organization Studies Standing Working Group on Organisational Trust, and of course a specialised journal, the *Journal of Trust Research*.

In terms of measures, while the field initially utilised a number of relatively underdeveloped measures, recent years have seen proliferation and now some consolidation towards a handful of measures that exhibit strong psychometric and nomological properties (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2008; Mayer & Davis, 1999; McAllister, 1995; McEvily & Tortoriello, 2011).

As the field has advanced, scholars have naturally shifted from focusing on rather general insights into trust, towards more focused questions and topics. This is manifested in numerous journal special issues both within and beyond organisation studies (e.g. Bachmann, Knights, & Sydow, 2001; Benbasat, Gefen, & Pavlou, 2010; Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Bijlsma-Frankema & Koopman, 2004; Costa & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2007; Costa & Peiro, 2009; Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009; McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003; Möllering, Bachmann, & Lee, 2004; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Zeffane & Connell, 2003), and edited books often focused on specific themes such as culture, human resource management, distrust, cooperation and research methods (e.g. Bachmann & Zaheer, 2006; Bijlsma-Frankema & Klein Woolthuis, 2005; Cook, 2001; Hardin, 2004; Kramer & Cook, 2004; Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012; Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Lane & Bachmann, 1998; Lyon, Möllering, & Saunders, 2012; Nooteboom & Six, 2003; Saunders, Skinner, Dietz, Gillespie, & Lewicki, 2010; Searle & Skinner, 2011).

Finally, turning to practice, the field has seen numerous books and other monographs (e.g. Covey, 2006; Dietz & Gillespie, 2011; Galford & Drapeau, 2002; Gambetta & Hamill, 2005; Hurley, 2012; Mishra & Mishra, 2013; Reina & Reina, 1999; Simons, 2008) and practitioner articles (e.g. Chua, 2012; Galford & Drapeau, 2003; Hurley, 2006; Hurley, Gillespie, Ferrin, & Dietz, 2013; Joni, 2004; Kramer, 2009; Simons, 2002) published with the aim to provide practitioners with guidance on how to build trust and address trust problems in organisations.

While the above progress is remarkable, the institutionalisation of trust has lagged in some critical ways. While the sheer quantity of trust research is impressive, it is also unbalanced, with applied research, research translations and evidence-based recommendations to practitioners, as well as teaching resources, in relatively short supply. Of the relatively large number of practitioner books published, only a handful have been published by scholars, which raises a concern that practitioners may be guided towards trust solutions that are not grounded in rigorous research. While we have strong measures of trust, they are seldom incorporated into practice. While we are developing a body of broad and deep academic knowledge of trust, we have very few pedagogical tools (such as cases, simulations, etc.; see Mayer & Norman, 2004 for one example) for teaching trust.

There is also a lack of institutional recognition in organisational terms. While there are probably hundreds of researchers who would identify themselves as 'trust scholars', only in the last couple of years have we begun to see centres or institutes for the study and/or practice of trust (the Centre for Trust and Ethical Behaviour at

Coventry University, the Centre for Trust Research at the University of Surrey, and the Consortium for Trustworthy Organizations at Fordham University, are examples), and very few chaired professorships (the EWE Chair of Economic Organization and Trust at Jacobs University, held by Guido Möllering, is one example). Finally, while many business, government, NGO and university leaders proclaim trust to be important, it is seldom a prominent focus of organisational change and culture interventions, it is seldom a stand-alone topic in Executive Development courses, and it seldom appears as a stand-alone course in EMBA, MBA and undergraduate business courses.

In sum, while we have made admirable progress in studying trust as a scientific construct, we have made insufficient progress in applying trust research to practice and teaching, and trust has not yet gained the recognition it needs and deserves in our universities, businesses, governments and NGOs.

Toward further institutionalisation of trust research and practice

Should we be concerned about this imbalance between trust research and practice? Should we push for further institutionalisation? To answer these questions, it is worthwhile to consider one additional factor: societal needs. Since the Enron-era scandals of 2001, the world has seen an unremitting pattern of trust-related violations by companies, governments, NGOs and their leaders. This pattern seems to have continued unabated, for over a decade now, and in fact the 2008 global financial crisis is often characterised as arising to a large degree from trust issues and violations.

Thus, we see an ironic situation in which the quantity of trust violations seems to have increased hand in hand with the quantity of trust research. If we were to speculate about the direction of causality in this correlation, the more plausible explanation is that trust violations, and the sheer importance of trust in society, are influencing the greater volume of trust research. That is, the societal needs surrounding trust are driving an increasing number of scholars to devote large portions of their time and resources to the study of trust. (The reverse explanation, that trust research is driving trust violations, is as unsettling as it is implausible). Is there a societal need for further institutionalisation of trust? I suggest the answer is a resounding yes, but particularly for further institutionalisation in terms of translations and practical implications.

What should happen next? First, while we may lament that not enough trust research has made its way into practice, we can also appreciate that at least there does exist a science of trust that is available to be put into practice. As an analogy, we may not be able to or even want to protect against every transmittable disease. But, at least we do have a science of immunology that is available to researchers and practitioners to draw on when an epidemic arises. While we may debate whether trust violations have reached an epidemic level, we can certainly take some comfort that the science is well developed and available for use as and when needed.

Second, while I certainly hope that academic research on trust proceeds with the same vigour it has to date, I also hope that at least some researchers shift more of their time, effort and resources to translation and practice via writing (e.g. practitioner articles, books, blogs, editorials), speaking, teaching and/or consulting. We may lament that policy makers and leaders do not often consult us or our science.

But if we wish to impact practice, we need to take our case to practice, not wait for practice to come to us.

What will the world look like when the practical institutionalisation of trust catches up with the academic institutionalisation of trust? We will know we have succeeded when organisations conduct annual trust surveys and act on them, when leaders are selected, trained and evaluated in terms of trust, and when leaders who fail to earn and maintain trust will fail to remain leaders. Our bookshelves will be full of books that reflect and leverage the trust literature. There will be numerous practitioner articles, written by scholars, giving practical, evidence-based guidance on how trust can be built and repaired. Trust courses will occupy a central position in Executive Development training menus, and they will appear frequently in EMBA, MBA and undergraduate course catalogues, even as core classes. There will be established tools, such as cases and simulations, for teaching trust.

Finally, we should not focus solely on the practical motivations for studying trust. Trust is one of the most fundamental elements of interpersonal relationships, organisations and societies. In studying trust, we increase our understanding of human nature at the level of interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, organisational functioning and ultimately, the very existence of human society.

Acknowledgements

I thank Madelene Poon Chok Yen for valuable research assistance with this commentary.

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