Unpacking Professional Trust – Dimensions of Trust in Swedish Auditors' Client Relations

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Sociological Research Online, Volume 12, Issue 2,
< http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/2/larsson.html>
doi:10.5153/sro.1531

Received: 25 Sep 2006 Accepted: 14 Mar 2007 Published: 30 Mar 2007

Abstract

This paper studies client trust in professionals, theoretically and empirically. The theoretical elaboration, founded on general sociological theories of trust, aims to distinguish different dimensions of trust – personal, impersonal, and process trust – and to explicate the stabilizing identities and control mechanisms on which they are based: persons, roles, programs and values. The empirical case study concerns what aspects of trust, and what expectations and controls, are most important for Swedish auditors when it comes to building and maintaining client trust. The analysis is based on data from a postal inquiry survey in 2003. It shows that practicing auditors experience the personal dimension of trust as primary, the processual as secondary, and the impersonal as tertiary. The study thus confirms the importance of personal trust between auditor and client, stabilized by the professional's individual character and conduct, but points also to the fact that the institutionalization of distrust in professional roles, programs and values is central for building personal as well as impersonal trust. The institutionalized roles, programs and values of the profession ensure that a minimum of trust from the market and the client is present before personal trust is established.

Keywords: Trust, Confidence, Distrust, Social Control, Professions, Clients, Accountants, Auditors

Introduction

1.1 In the 'taxonomic approach' of the sociology of professions, it has commonly been held that public confidence and client trust are central traits of a profession (Saks 1983). They have been seen as a common denominator of the older 'free' professions (priests, doctors and lawyers) and the modern 'market' and 'welfare' professions such as accountants, financial analysts, PR consultants, social workers, psychologists and teachers (Barber 1963; Brien 1999; cf. Freidson 2001: 215ff.). Also, from a more critical perspective, it is often thought that the 'professional project' includes activities which aim to create and strengthen public confidence and client trust. In some cases one might even speak of a 'commodification of trust', in that trustworthiness has become an integral part of the services. This is the case in the market professions, such as auditors, business attorneys, finance analysts, PR consultants and securities analysts (Fournier 1999: 286; Larson 1979: 9ff.; Oliver 1997: 233).

1.2 Despite its central role in the theory of professions, some of the problems of trust seem insufficiently explored in this sociological field – though not entirely missing (e.g. Barber 1983: 131ff.; Edwards et al. 2006; Oliver 1997; Svensson 2006). An important exception is the sociology of medicine/health care, which has a fast-growing literature on public/client trust that, according to Groenewegen (2006: 3), would benefit from a comparative research agenda focusing on other professions as well (cf. Calnan & Sanford 2004; Hall et al. 2002; Gilson 2003; Lee-Treweek 2002; Rowe & Calnan 2006).

1.3 The underdevelopment of the concept of trust in the theory of professions is, as pointed out by Groenewegen (2006:1), particularly striking considering the comprehensive conceptual elaboration of trust in general sociology, and specifically in analyses of economic and political contexts. The present paper aims to conceptualize and study client trust in professionals, with an empirical focus on the accountancy profession. My intention is to unpack the concept of 'client trust' by separating different dimensions of trust theoretically and empirically. Thereby, I want to show how of existing analytical concepts of trust taken from general sociology can contribute to the sociology of professions. The approach is demonstrated with an empirical case study of Swedish corporate auditors' views of client trust.

1.4 The conceptual elaboration is made with the help of theories describing the role and function of trust in modern societies, and theoretical conceptualizations of different aspects or dimensions of trust and their relation to social control. The empirical case study consists of an analysis of Swedish auditors' views on client trust and potential causes of client distrust. The analysis is based on a postal inquiry survey answered by 694 Swedish auditors in 2003. In addition, reports from the Swedish professional associations and interviews with their representatives are used to give a background to the problem of trust in the profession.

1.5 The paper begins with a general theoretical discussion of the significance of trust in modern societies, with particular weight given to trust in the professions. Next comes a more focused description of how public auditors and the external audit at the same time build and depend on trust, and a conceptual elaboration of personal, impersonal and process aspects of trust. The conceptual analysis leads to an attempt to explicate the stabilizing 'identities' and control mechanisms on which the trustful expectations on professionals are based: persons, roles, programs and values. Thereafter follows an empirical analysis of what aspects of trust, and what kinds of expectations and controls, are most important for Swedish auditors when it comes to building and maintaining client trust. The paper ends with a discussion of possible conclusions from the theoretical and empirical analyses, and of different ways of broadening the approach put forward in the empirical case study.

1.6 An overall conclusion is that that, even though personal trust between auditors and client is regarded as primary by auditors, the institutionalization of distrust in professional roles, programs and values is also central for building personal as well as impersonal trust. I argue for the interpretation that personal trust is maintained through the personal creation and personification of the roles, values and control programs that are institutionalized in the profession. They make up an institutionalization of distrust in order to enculturate trust.

Differentiation, uncertainty and the importance of trust

2.1 Problems of trust and confidence are often considered particularly acute in modern societies (Giddens 1990: 79ff.; Seligman 1997: 33ff.). The theoretical descriptions follow different lines, but they are basically anchored in what are stated as two defining characteristics of modernity. Firstly, older forms of community, traditions and decisive status positions are weakening, resulting in increased individual freedom and pluralization of life worlds. Secondly, society is differentiated into value spheres or systems, whereby the actors' expectations and actions are disembedded from local communities and coordinated by media and formal roles, instead of by understanding based on shared life worlds (Habermas 1987: 153ff.).

2.2 The differentiation of social systems such as the economy, politics and the law is achieved through the establishment of formally defined roles and programs and generalized symbolic media such as money, political power and rules. These roles, programs and media bring about the possibility for actors to interact with unknown individuals in complex systems of interaction and function (Alexander & Colomy 1990; Chernilo 2002). In that way, differentiation creates new uncertainties. For example, the anonymous economic relations shaped by the formal roles and regulations of the market economy are stripped of much moral and religious meaning, as well as of expectations related to kinship and status. Thereby, economic processes and interaction are guided not primarily by principles of morality, solidarity, reciprocity or householding, but by calculated risk-taking and goal-rational approaches based on individual interest or corporate profit maximation (Luhmann 1982: 198-202; cf. Habermas 1987: 162ff.; Polanyi 2001: 45ff.).[1]

2.3 The abstract relations that distinguish the market economy from older morality- and community-based economic orders bring about a dependence on formal role fulfillments and controls. Informal and direct forms of social control are supplemented by formalized systems of control, and personal trust by system trust. The abstract trust in the market mechanisms that is built by the organization of formal roles, relations and controls is said to be central to the functioning of modern economies. It integrates the actors, mobilizes action, and releases creativity and entrepreneurship by reducing complexity, and it stabilizes the coordinative capacity of the money medium and reduces the transaction costs of market actors (Barber 1983: 19-22; Luhmann 1979: 15; Nooteboom 2002: 102f.; Sztompka 1999: 103f.).

2.4 Shapiro (1987) has described how the depersonification of the economy leads to a development of advanced systems of control, since the abstract relations and system trust are far more control-demanding than older forms of personal trust. The consequence is a growth of new layers of procedural norms, organizational forms and control specialists who 'institutionalize distrust' in order to build and stabilize system trust (cf. Braithwaite 1998). Zucker (1986) has analyzed this development in her study of the change in economic relations and trust in connection with the transformation of the market economy in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century. As a parallel to an increasingly anonymous market, a number of formal control mechanisms were created to substitute for personal trust. Beside formal regulations and organizations, professionals such as auditors and corporate lawyers were central in creating impersonal trust.

Trust in the professionals

2.5 Even though the professions have a long history, their specialized, knowledge-based and self-controlled services are often seen as a characteristic of modern societies (Barber 1985). The development of the professions has in itself been depicted as 'a mechanism of transition from the society of estates of early modern Europe to the functionally differentiated society of modernity' (Stichweh 1997: 95). This has to do with the professions' occupational activities and interests being related to specialized social functions, though often indirectly by providing their clients with services related to specific problems. Beside their specialization and expert knowledge in a certain area, the professional groups have a central function in bridging uncertain situations for their clients, and for the wider society (Giddens 1990: 83-92; Evetts 2003: 397). This may be exemplified by the market professions, who do not only provide expert advice and guard the corporation's 'good health'. They may also be viewed as an institutional structure restraining egoism in the economy, since their ethical self-regulation guides their actions beyond narrow economic self-interest (Barber 1983: 104ff.; Brint 1994: 46-48, 81-85). Such statements should be interpreted not as showing a 'naïve' assumption about professional altruism, but as meaning that professionals' activities are delimited by regulations and expectations which give them incentives to uphold non-economic values as well as their clients' interests (Brint 1994: 81-85; Bourdieu 1991: 182f.; Holmwood 2006: 133f.).

2.6 Irrespective of whether trust is viewed as a characterizing trait or as a strategic goal in a 'professional project' (cf. Saks 1983), professions deal with problems which cannot be solved in a standardized way, such as existential questions or diseases, or economic issues related to laws, management, finance and accounting. The professional is to handle such problems with the help of theoretically based knowledge and practical skills that the client lacks, and the client leaves his/her problems to a professional to solve at his/her own discretion (Abbott 1988: 35ff.; Freidson 2001: 17ff.). It is exactly this competence gap between the client and the professional that must be bridged by trust (Parsons 1972: 127f.; cf. Coffee 2006:1). The act of trust, therefore, consists in the client giving the professional power over him, it includes an element of risk-taking (Luhmann 1979: 33; cf. Dumouchel 2005; Sztompka 1999: 25f.).

2.7 Stated in interactionist terms, trust is a set of relational expectations of cognitive, normative or emotive kinds that makes interaction possible in spite of uncertainty in outcome. The interaction is shaped by the parties' 'weak inductive knowledge' based on previous interaction, by their moral ideas about what is a correct treatment, or by their appreciation for the other actor (Barber 1983: 8f.; Lane 1998: 4ff.; Lewis & Weigert 1985). Trust is needed precisely because the truster cannot foresee the outcome and lacks the means to enforce his or her expectations – and the competence gap, together with professional discretionary judgment, accentuates the uncertainty in the client's position (cf. Seligman 1997: 62f.).

2.8 The client's trust in professionals is more person-oriented than abstract system trust, but more impersonal than the familiarity that characterizes relations in traditional communities and informal personal networks. In many cases the client–professional relation is not really characterized by true personal trust, but by something that mimics or simulates it (Pixley 1999: 659; Shapiro 1987: 636). That is, the client's trust is not based on the other's personal character, but rather on his or her competencies and professionalism.

2.9 Despite the importance of 'personal' client trust, also abstract system trust and formal controls are significant for the trust in professionals. They must gain public confidence for their services and for the abstract body of knowledge that these are based upon (Abbott 1988: 59ff., 184ff.; Larson 1979: 16-18). Consequently, the client's trust in the individual professional and trust in the profession at large are related to each other as well as to different forms of control (cf. Rowe & Calnan 2006). It is this connection between trust and control that I will focus on in the next section, with an aim to distinguish different aspects of client trust and explain how they are stabilized, by looking at the auditors.

Trust and control in the accounting profession

3.1 Corporate financial auditing was established in the nineteenth century to secure the information needed by stock owners to decide on investment. The risk of bankruptcy and fraud was considerable, and the investors needed someone to verify that corporate financial statements could be trusted (Chandler et al. 1993). This is still a primary aim of auditing, but in relation to a wider circle of interested parties. According to the Swedish professional accountancy organization FAR's (now FAR SRS: http://www.farsrs.se) code of ethics from 2003, the basic task of the accountancy sector at large is to contribute to confidence in the financial information given by corporations, organizations and authorities (FAR 2003: 441). The specific aim of the external audit is to produce an audit report, based on an audit of the annual report and the accounts (the financial audit), as well as of the management and board (the management audit). The audit thereby ensures credibility in the financial information and confidence in the management in relation to owners as well as creditors, suppliers, customers, employees, and the state and local authorities (FAR 2003: 14ff.).

3.2 According to the interviewed representatives of the Swedish public accounting associations, confidence and trust are central to all their work: from creating conditions for professionalism, and controlling compliance with professional ethics, to public communication. Trust and confidence are anchored in the auditor's independence,[2] confidentiality, and competence – three central aspects of professionalism (FAR 2000: 91ff.; cf. Moizer 1991). The need for both independence and confidentiality indicates the divergent interests of the management, the owners, employees, and other parties (Brooks 2001; Diamant 2004: 79ff., 180ff.). The audit may thus be seen as an institutionalization of distrust creating conditions for impersonal trust/confidence in an anonymous market (Braithwaite 1998; Shapiro 1987; Zucker 1986). Consequently, the auditors and the audit firms are spoken of as 'reputational intermediaries' or even 'private regulators of financial markets', reducing some of the problems of uncertainty by diffusing trust and distrust in financial information (Coffee 2006: 2; Mutti 2004: 13). They are in the business of commodifying trust and distrust, producing verifications that aim to bridge the deficit of information which shareholders and other market actors have in relation to corporate managements (Oliver 1997; Macdonald 1995: 187ff.).

3.3 In spite of the distrustful aspect of the external audit, and its statutory character, it is dependent on a trustful relationship between the auditor and the client corporation.[3] Without cooperation and trust from the client, the auditor will have a hard time fulfilling the assignment. The auditor's confidentiality is there to secure client trust. The duty of client confidentiality guarantees that any information about the corporation stays between the auditor and the client – with the exception of the audit report. The auditor's independence is a corresponding warranty for other parties that the auditor is not 'captured' by the interests of the corporation (Sikka & Willmott, 1995). The 'honest disinterestedness' of independence is thus what distinguishes auditing from consulting (Jeppesen 1998).

Personal, impersonal and process aspects of trust

3.4 Both personal and impersonal forms of trust are contingency-bridging expectations on future outcomes, but they are attached to different stabilizing structures. With Luhmann's (1995: 278ff.) designation, we may specify such structures in terms of four time-binding 'identities' – persons, roles, programs, and values – on which expectations and different forms of social control are centered. I will now try to elaborate the concepts of personal, impersonal and process trust, in order to clarify what kind of expectations these different kinds of trust are based on, and to what degree they are stabilized by the institutionalized expectations and control mechanisms that surround a profession such as the auditors. Thereby a first step is taken towards the empirical analysis of the Swedish auditors' views of client trust.

3.5 The concept 'personal trust' depicts weak but active expectations on other concrete individuals and their capacity to act autonomously in relation to institutionalized roles and role expectations. Such trust is required because of the trustee's agency and freedom to act independently of the truster's capacity for control (Seligman 1997: 44f.; Luhmann 1979: 71; Sztompka 1999: 25f.). Personal trust, then, may be specified as a truster's expectation that the interaction and outcome will be stabilized by the trustee's *person* and the *values* he/she is committed to.[4]

3.6 *Impersonal* forms of trust consist of more passive expectations on social institutions and organizations to produce reliable and predictable outcomes (Heimer 2001; Luhmann 1979; 1988; Pixley 1999, Shapiro 1987). 'Impersonal trust', 'confidence' and 'system trust' are expectations on abstract social entities – institutions, organizations, professions, and those role expectations, regulations and routines that they establish in order to coordinate action (Seligman 1997: 22f., 48-64; cf. Nuissl 2002; Sztompka 1999: 24). In the impersonal forms of trust, the expectations on the outcome are attached to the institutionalized *roles*, *programs* and *values* that coordinate and stabilize interactions and outcomes in markets, bureaucracies or professional contexts.

3.7 Occasionally, *process trust* is distinguished from the personal and impersonal forms. Empirically, it is very close to trust as a 'weak inductive knowledge', mentioned above, but analytically it is specified by its retrospective character. It is based on the experience of the outcome of the truster's previous interaction and exchange, and possibly on the vague future-oriented expectation of 'business as usual' (Zucker 1986: 60f.; cf. Giddens 1990: 28f.; 83ff.). It is therefore less elaborate than impersonal forms of trust which are grounded in the knowledge, even if incomplete and vague, of institutionalized roles, programs and values in a specific organizational context (Braithwaite 1998; Shapiro 1987).

3.8 The expectation that interaction and outcomes will be stabilized by an individual's person and values, or by a set of institutionalized roles, programs and values, is uncertain, but not groundless. Its effectuation is provided for, on the one hand, by the actors' identification with the expectations held on their person, role or specific values. On the other hand, it is shaped through the social control directed at these identities. The control of persons is primarily informal (Misztal 2001). The control of institutionalized roles, programs and values is formally organized to a higher degree. Public confidence is thus built upon multiple layers of socially organized distrust such as supervisory agencies, disciplinary organs, auditors, and insurance systems in the economic context (Braithwaite 1998; Shapiro 1987; Zucker 1986).

Dimensions of control in the professions

3.9 It is theoretically and publicly recognized that professionals are controlled with expectations held on their persons, roles, programs and values, in order to build client trust and public confidence. The status and character of professionals as *persons,* embodying certain *values,* were of particular importance in the 'elder' professions. To be professional was to conduct oneself in a gentlemanly manner, without hindsight to economic gain or self-interest (Elliott 1972: 48ff.). Such expectations were held on the early professional auditors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, too (McMillan 2004: 950). Even today such recognition of the professional character exists. Brien (1999: 405) claims that being a professional means 'being a certain sort of person, with particular values, attitudes and traits of character, that are no less important than the knowledge and skills a professional possesses'. Professionals are socialized and selected as such persons through education and the collegial control of recruitment and careers. The encouragement of social conformity in the public accountancy profession, for example, has been analyzed in detail by Hanlon (1994: 107ff.). In addition to the expectations held by professional colleagues and seniors, the public and the media, too, articulate clear expectations on the professional's character: that public accountants are careful, hardworking, with strong integrity, social skill and judgment, and that they honor values of accuracy, exactitude, objectivity, independence, and inquisitiveness (Grey 1998; Roslender 1992: 38-40, 189ff.; cf. Montagna 1974: 59ff.).

3.10 For the individual practitioner, the profession is not only a personal identity, but a formally regulated *role* based on a set of basic professional *values* – such as the independence, confidentiality, and competence of auditors. The professional role is developed through formal education and signaled by the authorization, assuring that the practitioner holds certain theoretical, practical and technical skills and is considered honest. In addition, the professional practice is circumscribed by legal as well as ethical professional regulation, relating to the audit itself, as well as the overall organization of the business.

3.11 The core of professional practice is said to consist in discretionary application of general knowledge and skill in unique cases. Still, professional work is often embedded in more standardized *programs*, for which it is of greatest importance that there is public confidence. The medical operation, court proceedings, and the external audit are some examples. These partly routinized or standardized procedures or programs that surround professional practice are there to stabilize the outcome and thus to increase public confidence – although there are claims that trust in the public accountants' professional discretion due to such standardization and regulation has been replaced by a 'mechanical objectivity' (Porter 1995: 89ff.).

3.12 Besides the programming of the audit itself in legislation, ethics, and standards as well as in computer programs and checklists, there are more basic programs controlling the profession at large in order to guarantee competence and probity, such as the long educational programs and the formal authorization requirements and exams (Donabedian 1993; cf. Seal and Vincent-Jones 1997: 408ff.). Furthermore, there exist meta-programs developed to stabilize professional practice, such as quality controls, professional self-regulation and disciplinary organs, and external supervision – such as the Swedish Supervisory Board of Public Accountants (Revisorsnämnden, RN) (http://www.rn.se/). They uphold what Freidson (2001: 216f.) speaks of as 'institutional ethics', which regulate the financing, administration and control of professional practice. Additional layers of external control consist of the market discipline exercised by clients, and the possibility of the media to put pressure on a profession (Daniel 1998: 15ff.; Parsons 1972).

Auditors' experiences of client trust and distrust

4.1 The empirical question raised by the conclusion above concerns what expectations and controls are most important for the establishment and maintenance of client trust. This article will approach the problem through an analysis of Swedish auditors' views of client trust and causes of distrust. The analysis is based on a postal inquiry survey answered by 694 Swedish auditors in 2003. One might argue that it would be better to approach the clients and other market actors directly, since the auditors may be wrong about the basis of their trust. They may for instance overstate the importance of their own personal appearance in relation to the institutionalized professional factors that make up a stable precondition for personal and process trust to emerge. However, if one wants to understand how auditors handle their client relations, their 'reflexive expectations' are central. These expectations are the cognitive tools by which auditors orient themselves toward their environment in their strategic efforts to produce and maintain client trust and public confidence. Furthermore, since large accounting firms usually make their own client evaluations, the auditors' views on client trust are anchored in client surveys as well as in personal experience. Yet the following analysis of the professionals' perspective on client trust is meant to be only a first contribution to the empirical study of client trust in the accounting profession. To get the full picture, it is of importance to study the client perspective and other market actors as well.

4.2 The total population of qualified (authorized or approved) auditors in Sweden in 2003 was 4,146. The majority were organized in two professional associations: FAR (previously Föreningen Auktoriserade Revisorer, the Swedish Institute of Authorized Public Accountants) organized 2,520, primarily authorized, auditors, and Svenska Revisorsamfundet SRS (the Swedish Association of Auditors) organized 1,391 auditors, specializing in auditors at medium and small companies. Two independent random samples were drawn from their lists of members, 750 individuals from FAR and 600 from SRS. The 1350 postal questionnaires were sent out during the fall of 2003, and the response rate was 52 percent (net). A non-response analysis shows good representativeness in terms of gender and organizational membership in relation to the sampling frame (FAR/SRS members), and of degree of authorization (authorized/approved) in relation to the whole population of qualified auditors.[5]

4.3 The survey contained 27 questions in which the respondents could estimate the degree to which clients base their trust on different aspects of the auditor's personal competence and character, the interaction with the client, the formal regulation of auditors and auditing, and the information produced by the firm, the professional associations or the media. The questions are based on the general theoretical discussion of personal, process and impersonal trust, but developed in relation to the actual institutional structure surrounding auditing and auditors, as well as the official descriptions of auditing and client relations by the professional organization FAR and by related public agencies. In an open-ended question the respondents were asked to exemplify also what undermines clients' trust. A total of 440 examples were given by 247 of the respondents. These were classified substantively with the help of the analytical distinction between personal, impersonal and process trust.

The basis of client trust

4.4 Table 1 presents a factor analysis of the 27 items concerning the basis of client trust. The ranking of the items is based on the mean weight given to them by all the respondents (1 = to a very low degree, 5 = to a very high degree).

Table 1. Dimensions of client trust. Means and factor loadings

	Mean	Factor 1 *Impersonal trust*	Factor 2 *Personal trust*	Factor 3 *Process trust*
That the auditor shows discretion in delicate matters	4.55		**0.47**	0.28
That the auditor cares about the client	4.48		**0.49**	0.21
Social skill (capacity to form good relations)	4.39		**0.58**	
Firm in character (integrity, judgment, strong principles)	4.36		**0.41**	
Conduct (being polite, correct and agreeable)	4.23		**0.58**	
The professional confidentiality	4.11	0.38		0.38
The client's experience of previous audits by the auditor	4.09			**0.78**
That the auditor shows trust in the client	4.07		**0.58**	
The reputation of the accountancy firm	4.02	0.27		0.32
The auditor's experience of audits in similar companies	3.97	0.30		0.20
The client's experience of previous audits by the firm	3.95			**0.81**
The client's experience of consulting-services by the firm	3.77			**0.46**
That regular contacts with the client are maintained	3.71		**0.48**	0.31
That the auditor appears independent toward the client	3.66	**0.47**	0.21	
The auditor's education in relevant areas of knowledge	3.62	0.32		0.27
That the auditor acts adaptably toward the client	3.39		**0.50**	
The media reports on auditing	3.36	0.24		0.29
The high requirements for authorization/approval	3.35	**0.65**		
The client's acquaintance with the audit routines	3.10	0.27	0.22	**0.41**
The formal independence vis-à-vis the client	3.00	**0.66**		
The external supervisory control	2.98	**0.71**		
The ethical guidelines ("god revisorssed")	2.97	**0.83**		
That the auditor shares the values of the client	2.94		**0.54**	
The quality control of firms and auditors	2.84	**0.80**		
The FAR/SRS information about auditing	2.84	**0.50**		
The practical guidelines ("god revisionssed")	2.81	**0.83**		
The firm's information about auditing	2.72	**0.47**		0.26
Eigenvalue		5.47	2.49	1.76
% of variance		20.3	9.2	6.5

Principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Number of factors set to 3. Factor loadings <0.2 suppressed.

4.5 The factor analysis confirms that the three analytical forms of trust discussed above exist as empirical dimensions.[6] The items loading strongly on the first factor represent impersonal trust: those aspects of client trust that are based on the professional role, programs and institutionalized values that are regulating auditors and auditing. The strongest loads on this factor have ethical and practical guidelines – professional ethics for accountants (*god revisorssed*) and generally accepted auditing standards (*god revisionssed*) – followed by quality and supervisory controls, legally regulated independence, high requirements for authorization, and formal information about auditing produced by the firm or the professional associations. Finally, a more personal expression of these values loads fairly strongly on this factor: that the auditor appears to be independent vis-à-vis the client in practice.

4.6 The second factor represents personal trust: aspects of trust that concern the auditor's individual conduct and character. The auditor's conduct (specified as being polite, correct and agreeable), social skill (capacity to form good relations), and mutual trust in the client load most strongly on this factor. These items are followed by: that the auditor shares the values of the client; cares about the client; acts adaptably; shows discretion in delicate matters; maintains regular contacts with the client; and appears firm in character (with integrity, judgment, and strong principles). It should be noted that the formulation 'shows discretion in delicate matters' is somewhat ambiguous and may be interpreted as being either discerning or discreet. Both interpretations, however, fit the personal trust dimension.

4.7 The third factor indicates a third dimension of trust, corresponding to the idea of process trust: it is based on the client's experience of previous interaction with the auditor or accountancy firm. The strongest loading on this factor has the client's experience of previous audit by the same auditor or firm. Items with weaker, but still noteworthy, loadings are the client's experience of consultancy services by the same accountancy firm, and acquaintance with the audit routines.

4.8 Table 1 shows that items signaling personal trust (factor 2) are generally valued higher than items representing impersonal trust (factor 1). The items that represent process trust (factor 3) are placed in the middle of the ranking order. Thus, according to Swedish auditors, the personal dimension is most important for the client's trust. The process dimension comes second, and the impersonal aspects of trust are of least importance. All personally related aspects of trust are valued above the role-related, with three exceptions. Two of the exceptions are 'That the auditor shares the values of the client', and 'That the auditor acts adaptably toward the client', both which are professionally less sought-after personal qualities, since they disagree with the values of integrity and independence. The third exception is 'The professional confidentiality', which is valued high although it theoretically belongs to the impersonal aspect – empirically, however, this item does not clearly belong to any of the three factors.[7]

Causes of client distrust

4.9 The above results are somewhat complicated by the analysis of the 440 examples of causes of client distrust given in the open-ended question, since these indicate that the professional role aspects of the relation are at least as important as the personal aspects when it comes to causes of client distrust. Also in theory, though, the problem of distrust complicates the issue since it is seen not just as the lack or opposite of trust, but rather as 'a positive expectation of injurious action' (Luhmann 1979: 72). Distrust is based not primarily on a lack of familiarity or information, but on the existence of negative information or experience. According to Luhmann, there are strong incentives to begin a relationship with trust, since it is the easier option. This is particularly likely for situations in which there is no choice of engaging a professional or not, but a choice between individual professionals, as is the case for corporations subject to statutory audit.

4.10 Perhaps somewhat surprisingly in times of international accounting scandals – but also since a quite recent debate in Sweden about the damage to client trust that could follow legislation enacted in 1999 that auditors should report economic crime conducted by the managing directors or company board members to the public prosecutor (Larson 2005a; 2005b) – only a few examples of what undermines trust from clients are related to the profession and its organizational structures and regulation at large: its *programs* and *values*. In 23 instances, media scandals and unrealistic expectations on auditing (the 'expectation gap') are mentioned. Another 5 examples concern the client's apprehension that the auditor was 'running the tax authorities' errands' or 'acting as the law's henchman' – an issue related to the duty to report crime.

4.11 The most frequent type of examples, however, concern the individual auditor's professional *role* fulfillment in practice, primarily examples indicating that the skill or integrity expected of the auditor is lacking. A third (145) of the examples state that the client's trust is undermined if the auditor shows a lack of competence, knowledge or skill, or appears to be inexperienced generally or when it comes to the client's line of business. This may happen in situations where the auditor cannot answer questions or is uncertain, or if he/she gives inaccurate or poorly substantiated advice. For instance:

> If you leave incorrect answers to questions from a client, on a subject about which you are uncertain, instead of asking the client if you may come back with the correct answer later on. (Translation.)

4.12 Obvious negligence, mistakes, or subsequently detected errors in the accounts are other causes of client distrust in the same vein. Even a correct appraisal of the situation may, however, be problematic because of changing conditions:

> If you solve a problem according to current rules/law and these undergo changes – particularly retroactive changes, but also all changes that hinder 'long-term' planning. The client thinks that you 'don't know', that you are lacking in competence. (Translation.)

4.13 Even though it is logical that the client's trust contains expectations concerning the auditor's skill, this is an important complement to the ranking of different aspects of client trust in Table 1. In the ranking, the softer aspects of client expectations – those concerning personal appearance – were given higher mean values than the three items that were directly related to the auditor's competence and skill (the client's experience of previous audits performed by the same auditor; the auditor's experience of audits in companies of the same type; and the auditor's education in relevant areas of knowledge). This may be an effect of inadequate questions. It is possible that a higher value would have been given a formulation such as 'that the auditor appears competent in the eyes of the client'.

4.14 Beside the question of skill, 60 examples of causes of client distrust concern professional confidentiality: obvious breaches of secrecy or 'leakages'. It may be that 'information is leaking out, not necessarily externally but also internally in the organization (the client or accountancy firm)'. Moreover, an auditor who seems to be all too talkative or 'garrulous' in his/her interaction with the client may be a cause of client distrust, and 'if the auditor talks too much about unimportant things and the firm's other clients, even if it is done in an anonymous form.'

4.15 An additional 20 instances concern 'unserious' activities unexpected of a professional, such as 'following soft principles', 'giving illegal or irresponsible advice', 'operating in a gray zone', or being involved in dubious business, companies, or scandals. 16 examples state that unexpectedly high or unspecified invoices may be the cause of client distrust, and 54 examples – related to both the professional role and the personal conduct – concern delays and breaches against deadlines or agreements: 'We have examples where auditors have not fulfilled the assignments they have had, that is, they have not delivered what was promised, or in the period that was agreed upon.'

4.16 Another 72 examples refer clearly to the *personal* aspects of the auditor's conduct, such as lack of social skill, of respect for the client, of good manners, integrity, judgment or personal chemistry:

> Bad judgment, generally, for instance what/how the auditor says/expresses himself about his 'customers' (the client). I would like also to mention the importance of a balanced way of life, e.g. choice of car, choice of house, and taste in clothing. A lifestyle that is considered ostentatious is not confidence-inspiring. (Translation.)

4.17 Other examples in the same vein imply that the auditor does not appear to be caring, engaged or service-minded, or is too passive or indecisive:

> The client wants to be treated with professionalism, and feel that the auditor puts all his efforts in the assignment when it is started, e.g. the yearly audit. If these expectations are not met, trust is undermined instantly. (Translation.)

4.18 Close to the personal dimension, but also to the process dimension of trust, is another set of 54 examples emphasizing the importance of continuity and communication in relation to the client. The client's trust is undermined if there is a lack of running contact or information, if the auditor is unavailable or does not return calls from the client. Distrust may also be caused by a lack of coordination of the audit team, for instance if there is:

> Weak internal communication in the auditing firm, with the result that different persons are asking the same questions, and thereby give an unprofessional impression. (It is very important that those in charge of the audit team are informed about everything that is done in the assignment – even regarding consultations.). (Translation.)

4.19 Problems of this kind are also said to be the result of a frequent change of assistants in the audit team, which may disturb the necessary continuity and communication with the client.

4.20 To summarize, the importance of the auditor fulfilling the expectations related to the formal professional role is emphasized much more strongly by the respondents when it comes to the issue of distrustful client reactions than when asked about the basis of client trust.

Conclusions

5.1 The theoretical contribution of this paper to the analysis of client trust in the professions is the 'unpacking' of different aspects or dimensions of client trust – personal, impersonal and process trust – with an attempt to clarify what stabilizing, time-binding identities these trustful expectations are attached to: persons, roles, programs, and values. All this is not really new, but emerges from general sociology and general theories of trust. However, these theoretically developed distinctions are seldom used in the sociology of professions (for exceptions see Edwards et al. 2006; Lee-Treweek 2002; Gilson 2003; Svensson 2006).

5.2 The theoretical reasoning of the paper has aimed at a specification of aspects or dimensions of trust, which differ in terms of the structures or mechanisms to which the trustful expectations are attached. *Personal trust* consists of expectations on a person and the values to which he/she is committed. *Impersonal trust*, confidence, or system trust consists of expectations on the institutionalized roles, programs and values that stabilize the interaction and outcomes. *Process trust*, finally, consists of expectations stabilized by the truster's previous experience, rather than the trustee's person, values or role.

5.3 The empirical case demonstrates how this conceptual explication may be used empirically in the sociology of the professions. The main result of the case study is that the trustful relation between client and auditor is based on the auditor's personal appearance and the client's processual experience of auditing, rather than on formal aspects of professional regulation. The practicing auditors emphasize personal trust and the auditor's personification of discretion, care, social skill, character and conduct. The institutionalized aspects of auditing and the role of the auditor are ranked as more secondary – that is, the high requirements for authorization, the legally regulated independence, the ethical and practical professional self-regulation, the quality and supervisory controls, and the formal information about auditing from the firm and the professional associations.

5.4 The empirical analysis of causes of client distrust complicates these results somewhat, since it points to the significance of the professional role and regulations – not in the general sense, though, or even as issues related to the duty for auditors to report crime that was introduced in Sweden in 1999 (Larsson 2005a). The examples rather demonstrate the importance that the individual auditor fulfills the expectations placed on the professional role – and thus on auditors in general – when performing the audit. It is an individually oriented trust, although it is not placed on the individual as a person but as a professional: it is close to what is spoken of as a kind of mimicked or simulated personal trust. A large number of examples concern the distrust that may follow from lack of knowledge, skill, or the auditor's violating confidentiality or giving unserious advice.

5.5 The importance of appearing competent is specifically stressed as central for avoiding the undermining of client trust. This may be obvious, but the competence dimension ranked somewhat lower than the benevolence and integrity dimensions in the survey questions concerning what auditors thought that clients based their trust on. It must be admitted, though, that matters of ability and integrity – which are viewed as central causes of client distrust when lacking – are the point where person and role merge. This is especially true for professionals since there is a tendency that they achieve a total role: that the professional role becomes a central aspect of the person's identity and the expectations held on him/her as an individual (Elliott 1972: 130f.). The fact that client distrust is caused by insufficiencies in personal fulfillment of the professional role, and not by the formal role and regulations as such, verifies the assumption that distrust in this case evolves in a relation that initially is characterized by a basic impersonal trust stabilized through the institutionalized role, program and values of the auditing profession.

5.6 Still, the auditor must be able to personify and elaborate the professionally established roles, programs and values in the concrete client relation, which means that abstract or impersonal confidence is a basis on which personal trust can be built. The institutionalization of distrust, then, is a central mechanism not only for building impersonal or system trust, but for the mimicked or simulated forms of personal trust. It functions as a guarantee that a minimum of trust from the market and the client is present before personal trust is established, and reduces the time required to establish it. In addition, the formal professional role's definition and the institutionalized professional programs and values constitute standards by which the individual professional's performance is measured. This is confirmed by the fact that even though personal character and appearance are viewed as most important in building client trust, it is the inability to fulfill the formal professional role that is viewed as the main cause of client distrust.

5.7 To conclude: the empirical case study thus confirms conclusions from ethnographic studies that emphasize the personal trust dimension between auditors and client, and which point to the fact that auditing is about handling relations as well as accounting (Westerdahl 2005). The results seem to confirm the ideas of embeddedness/reembeddedness – that trust grounded in personal experience, networks of personal interaction and informal social control is central not only to traditional economies, but to the modern abstract and anonymous market economy as well (Giddens 1990; Granovetter 1985; Misztal 2001).

5.8 At the same time, the empirical result complicates this view since it also points to the importance of the institutionalized roles, programs and values that professional actors represent. It confirms the theories of Braithwaite (1998), Shapiro (1987) and Zucker (1986) according to which abstract controls, mechanisms and institutionalizations of distrust are central not only for system trust, but even for direct client trust in market professionals. As pointed out by Luhmann, personal and impersonal forms of trust are complementary (Luhmann 1988: 99). For a market to be functioning well, the actors are supposed both to have confidence in the different economic institutions – such as the monetary system, the forms of contracts and agreements, and supervisory agencies – and to trust their business partners. While the personal aspects of trust are the ones viewed as most important by the auditors, the impersonal and professional aspects of trust are not downplayed. On the contrary, the analysis indicates the reciprocal action of these different aspects of trust: personal trust is maintained through a personal creation and personification of the roles, values and control programs that are institutionalized in the profession. In other words, the roles, programs and values of the profession make up an institutionalization of distrust in order to enculturate trust (Braithwaite 1998).

5.9 Of course, personal, impersonal, and process trust are connected dimensions of trust in a relationship, rather than separate relations or types of trust. Many of the personal aspects of trust concern individual expressions of formally institutionalized professionalism. In the same way, the role, programs and values of the profession can be seen as an institutionalization of personal approaches and competencies that are often ascribed to the strong character of persons who were appointed as auditors before the professionalization of auditing. Even more evident is that process trust is not separate from the personal characteristics or professional roles and programs of the auditor. It depends on focusing upon the previous experience of the client, rather than on what the client expects. Therefore, the empirical analysis cannot be taken as verification that the personal aspects of the client relation are more important in an objective or absolute sense for the formation and maintenance of client trust. But they are more important in the reflexive expectations by means of which the auditors orient themselves in relation to their clients.

5.10 Thus, a weakness of the empirical case study is that it covers only the auditors' and not the clients' views on trust. Yet the auditors can be assumed to have a substantial knowledge of their clients, based on their own client experience and on client evaluations made at their firm. Furthermore, the empirical case study is primarily a survey of the auditors' reflexive expectations. It is what they think that their clients and other market actors expect of them that is in focus, and these expectations are central to the auditors' approaches to their clients, irrespective of their accuracy. At any rate, more research is needed in this area in order to understand the value and applicability of the conceptual tools presented in this paper and to elaborate them. Further investigation is also required to get an accurate description of specific empirical problems concerning the auditors' client relations. Firstly, additional light should be shed on the clients' understanding of trust and the relative importance of impersonal, personal and process trust, and of expectations based on persons, roles, programs and values. Secondly, it would be useful to compare client trust and causes of distrust between different professions, with diverse types of services, clients and client relations (cf. Groenewegen 2006). Finally, and perhaps most important is internationally comparative research that may relate differences in relations and expectations of trust to different institutional and professional contexts. Even though this study is not of such a comparative kind, it is my hope that it might contribute to such a research agenda.

Notes

[1]See Granovetter (1985) for a critique of this kind of description of the 'anonymous' market.

[2]In the Swedish Standards on Auditing (RS) from 2004 the concept of 'independence', which indicates an absolute status, has been replaced by the demand that professionals should fulfill their assignments with 'integrity' (with the aim of being honorable and truthful), 'objectivity' (defined as being fair, intellectually honorable and free from interest that may be in conflict with the interests of the client), 'impartiality' and 'independence' (FAR 2003: 443f.; cf. Diamant 2004).

[3]Formally the auditor's client is the corporation. In this paper the corporate management and representatives are spoken of as the client since they personify the corporation and in practice have been the ones appointing the auditor – though this is changing due to the recommendation in the Swedish Code of Corporate Governance from 2005 that joint stock corporation establish an audit committee. Other possibilities would be to view the board as the client, or the shareholders at large, since they are the ones appointing the auditors at the annual meeting and make up the primary addressee of the audit report. In many small companies, however, the demarcation between owners and managers is blurred since they are often the same physical persons. This is of relevance since all Swedish joint stock corporations are obliged to appoint authorized or approved public auditors – primarily to the benefit of the owners and for the prevention of economic crime – and since 200,000 of the 250,000 Swedish stock corporations are so-called micro-corporations (Thorell & Norberg 2005).

[4]Mayer et al. (1995) specify trust in other persons as expectations concerning the individual's *ability* (skills, competence, expertise, judgment, sense of business), *benevolence* (intentions and motivations to do good), and *integrity* (value congruence and consistency). Despite the general value of their classification, it is problematic in relation to the aim of this paper since is it does not discriminate between abilities and integrity of the individual person and those related to the professional role in general, such as being an auditor.

[5]Detailed accounts of the sample and the principles of selection are given in Larsson (2004).

[6]In the initial principal component analysis, based on the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue > 1), the number of factors was seven. In order to strengthen the reasonableness of the solution, the number of factors was subsequently reduced to three (cf. Kim and Mueller 1978: 41ff.). The difference between the solutions is chiefly that factor 2 in the final solution includes a number of items that formed several factors in the initial solution, each explaining a lower percentage of the variance but with stronger loadings from the items included. These factors were all theoretically close to personal trust. The final solution thus emphasizes clarity before richness of nuance.

[7]Two other items that theoretically would be expected to be loading stronger on the 'impersonal trust' factor are 'the auditor's experience of audits in similar companies' and 'the auditor's education in relevant areas of knowledge', which both signal professional competence/experience. The two additional items that are loading weakly on all three factors – 'the reputation of the accountancy firm' and 'the media reports on auditing' – are a different case, though. As opposed to all other items, they were not constructed as a

concrete expression of one of the three theoretical dimensions of trust. They were included in the survey since they were mentioned in the interviews with the representatives of the professional organization.

Acknowledgements

Tomas Berglund, Micael Björk, Oskar Engdahl, Hans Glimell, Lennart G. Svensson, Tiiu Soidre, and three anonymous reviewers have given helpful comments on preceding drafts. I am also grateful to Urban Engerstedt at FAR, and Martin Johansson at Svenska Revisorsamfundet, SRS for their cooperation in conducting the inquiry survey. The research on which this paper is based was funded by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet).

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