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Trust Within and Across Boundaries: Conceptual Challenges and Empirical Insights

Title:

Making Sense of Trust Within and Across Boundaries

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Abstract

Recent calls have been placed for researchers to consider trust within wider theoretical conceptualizations, and in doing so, undertake a ‘reality check’ on existing theories and established methods of empirical inquiry. We respond to this by analysing trust as a social construction created within unique socially constructed contexts, such as boundaries. Actors assign meaning to boundaries which then influence what and how trust is created. To better understand how this may be achieved we use the notion of sensemaking to bring contextual nuance to the fore. Narrative is the preferred way actors make sense of their experiences. It is also the way research is constructed and developed, and we consider the role of the dominant, normative-based trust discourse in influencing how trust is talked about among and between researchers. A practice-based research agenda is advanced that sees trust reframed as ‘trusting’ or ‘trust-in-making’, in order to represent it as something individuals do.

Introduction

Trust has been subject to significant academic thought and reflection from a variety of different perspectives (e.g. Luhmann, 1979; Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998; Simmel, 1950; Zucker, 1986). Möllering,

Bachmann and Lee (2004) note these early conceptual pieces later formed the theoretical foundation for empirical investigations aimed at hypothesis testing and model building. Traditionally, positivist research has been the dominant form of inquiry within the trust lexicon. This has been recognised and has prompted calls for more qualitative investigation based on new theoretical explorations (e.g. Atkinson, 2004; Child & Möllering, 2003; Möllering, et al., 2004). This conceptual paper addresses this challenge and conceives of trust as socially constructed phenomena constituted during ongoing organizing activities within specific contexts. Trust is framed as a social construction enacted within socially constructed realities, and we use the notion of sensemaking to examine current thinking surrounding trust, performing a “reality check” (Möllering, et al., 2004: 560) on existing arguments. This paper makes three contributions to knowledge of trust within and across boundaries. First, we draw a distinction between ‘real’ and ‘perceived’ boundaries, and consider how their constructions influence the meanings actors draw from them. Next, we examine trust as a social construction and postulate that the research discourse surrounding it is also socially constituted, and highlight how the language of trust research privileges certain claims over others. And finally, we use Weick’s (1995) notion of sensemaking to provide an alternative conceptualization of trust, trusting and trust-in-the-making, that brings situational nuance to the fore and offers a basis for qualitative inquiry.

Social constructionism is an ontological perspective of human phenomena as products of multiple human minds (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). To conceptualize trust and most boundaries as social constructions suggests they are not objective or independent, in the sense that they can be held and touched, but are subjective and dependent on the observer. This leads to the idea that the trusting situation is populated by active trust-makers and discounts the impression that any party is passive in its creation. However, not all parties make an equal contribution at all times. When creating trust, parties perceive their own trustworthiness and the trustworthiness of others in ways that may not be shared. Boundaries become value-laden constructs open to multiple interpretations and reframings. Exploring the relationships between trust and boundaries requires us to consider how, within these relationships, familiarity is socially construed. Sense is made

from encountered and extracted cues that make the unfamiliar familiar. Sensemaking is the privileged form through which phenomena are made understandable, and within this, narrative is the favoured medium by which actors make sense of unfamiliar contexts. Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a process by which hunches are fleshed out to make small details fit together into a workable whole. Good sensemaking is inherently practical in that it constructs realities that are reasonable, plausible and useful. Bringing a sensemaking perspective to bear on trust highlights the under-representation of contextual nuance in the form of power, identity, narrative, power, legitimacy, verisimilitude, ambiguity, equivocality and uncertainty in the trust literature.

The paper is structured into six sections. Following this introduction, we present a brief discussion on the current state of research, both on trust and boundaries. Next, we consider social constructionism and criticize research where a social constructionist-lite stance is taken, by pointing out that if we adopt a social constructionist position when seeking to further understanding of organizational phenomena, we cannot be selective in where we apply it. Sensemaking is then introduced which focuses on the meaning making activities of individuals and groups. In the fourth section we bring trust, boundaries and sensemaking together, highlighting both their common qualities and differences in how they have been researched. Implications for research are then presented that focus on a practice agenda which, we claim, is best addressed through in-depth case study and ethnographic inquiry. Finally, a conclusion is offered that summarizes the main arguments offered in the paper.

Perspectives on Trust

Over the past fifteen years trust has become an increasingly significant and important topic of organizational inquiry. For example, Journal Special Issues have focused on multi-disciplinary views of trust (*Academy of Management Review*), the micro-foundations of organizational trust (*Journal of Managerial Psychology*), trust in organizational contexts (*Organization Science*), trust and trustworthiness (*Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization*), and the link between trust and control (*International Sociology*). Amongst others, the theoretical foundations of trust are

considered by Bijlsma-Frankema and Costa (2005), Möllering, et al. (2004) and Rousseau, et al. (1998); whereas the definitions, meanings, use and conceptual issues surrounding trust are discussed by Kramer (1999), McKnight, Cummings and Chervany (1998), and Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995). The nature, types and forms of trust are analyzed (e.g. Lee, 2004; McEvily, Perrone & Zaheer, 2003; Möllering, 2001), and its dynamic nature is noted (e.g. Hardin, 1992; Mayer et al., 1995; Nooteboom & Six, 2003; Six, 2003). The contexts within which trust is created are recognised as important (Mayer, et al., 1995; Möllering, 2006) and acontextual research is criticized (Rousseau, et al., 1998), but context-rich trust research still appears to be rare. Intra- and inter-organizational trust are the themes dominating Lane and Bachmann's (1998) edited volume. The benefits of trust are presented (e.g. Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Kramer, 1999; Rousseau, et al., 1998) and the notion of trustworthiness explored (e.g. Becerra & Gupta, 2003; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard & Werner, 1998). Cognitive and behavioural conceptions of trust result in work that studies the emotions triggering trust (e.g. McAllister, 1995; Weber, Malhotra & Murnighan, 2005), and the relationships this influences (Adobor, 2005; Atkinson, 2004; Brockner, Siegel, Daly, Tyler & Martin, 1997). Creating and sustaining trust is recognized as being a difficult task (Kramer, 1999). Practice oriented researchers reflect on how trust may be created and sustained (Child & Möllering, 2003; Ferrin & Dirks, 2003; Gillespie & Mann, 2004, Koeszegi, 2004, Kramer, 1999). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss and analyse this trust literature in depth, we acknowledge and seek to build upon this previous scholarship.

We focus on the conceptualizations of trust as a choice behaviour, a psychological state and on some of the sociological aspects of trust. Trust as a choice behaviour draws from the fields of sociology (Coleman, 1990), economy (Williamson, 1993), and politics (Hardin, 1992) and is regarded as being a rational (calculus-based) or a relational activity (Rousseau et al., 1998). The trusting individual is viewed as making a conscious choice on whether to trust or not, with the objective of reducing personal loss and increasing benefit (Kramer, 1999). Therefore, rational trust is seen to be based on the reputation, or perceived competence of others. Kramer (1999) notes that the rational choice notion of

trust has been used to make statements concerning how decisions about trust should be made, but criticizes this as not adequately understanding what actually happens in practice; “Most notably, a large and robust literature on behavioural decision making suggests that many of the assumptions of rational choice models are empirically untenable” (Kramer, 1999: 573). He (Kramer, 1999) adds that this concept of trust also neglects the influence of emotions and relations on trust choices. This is recognized by some scholars (e.g. Mayer, et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995; Tyler & Kramer, 1996), who seek to extend this limiting conceptualization of trust by adding a social orientation to the calculative, risk-taking orientation of rational choice trust. Relational trust is said to be based on emotions (McAllister, 1995) and the reliability and dependability arising from repeated interactions and exchanges. Increasing familiarity alongside positive expectations of the other, over risk taking and maintenance of the relationship, are seen to generate emotion-based relational trust (Gulati, 1995; Möllering, 2006; Rousseau, et al., 1998). To reconcile the tensions between rational and relational trust, Kramer (1999) suggests developing a contextual description that considers the influence of both aspects on choice, while recognizing one may be more dominant in some contexts than the other.

Trust as a psychological state refers to the cognitive processes and orientations underlying the emergence of trust, which take the concept beyond the idea of it as a function of rational choice (Kramer, 1999). From the perspective of the trusting party (trustor), trust is defined as a state of perceived vulnerability or risk, involving positive expectations concerning the behaviour of the other party that is to be trusted (trustee), and the trustor’s willingness to be vulnerable to the trustee (e.g. Mayer, et al., 1995; Kramer, 1999; Rousseau, et al., 1998). The source of the risk is the behaviour of the trustee which is uncertain and cannot be predicted, as motives or intentions are not fully known (Kramer, 1999). In extreme cases the trustee could behave in ways that do harm or violate the trustor, less extreme behaviour could result in disappointment or mild irritation. The interdependent nature of psychological trust highlights the idea that the risk-taking behaviour necessary for trust must not be enforced on the trustor (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005), as to do so would merely be an exercise of power and authority rather than the establishment of mutual trust. While the cognitive aspect of trust

is important when considering trust as a psychological state, suggestions have been made to extend this view by including affective and motivational aspects (e.g. Kramer, 1999; McAllister, 1995). Cognitive perspectives on trust have tended to be rather narrow in their focus and have generally had as their aim the establishing of generalised statements concerning the antecedents of trusting behaviour. By expanding psychological understandings of trust outside of these prescriptive conventions, more qualitative and subjective aspects are acknowledged requiring alternative epistemological guidance, if they are to be studied effectively.

Important, classical sociological studies on trust from Durkheim (1960), Simmel (1950), Weber (1947), Blau (1964) and Gouldner (1960) remain influential in today's understanding and conceptualization of trust (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Misztal, 1996). Möllering (2001) criticizes much current research for focusing only on the functional consequences of trust, such as, cooperative behaviour, and identifies that studies attempting to explain how trust is created are rare. Kramer (1999) notes social groupings mediate how trust is perceived in work situations. However, his analysis is limited to macro-descriptions of professional groupings. While we may trust professional groups per se, when we have the opportunity to use discretion we typically seek out further information on which we can draw our conclusions and make our decisions. We may trust dentistry as a profession, but if we are in the fortunate position of being able to choose between several dentists for a course of treatment, we commonly talk to people who have received similar care for their impressions of the dentist and the treatment they received. This activity may encapsulate what Simmel (in Möllering, 2001: 404) identifies as "a mysterious further element, a kind of faith that is required to explain trust and to grasp its unique nature". Perhaps this element is not so mysterious after all, but can be revealed in the mundane and daily actions we all engage in during our ongoing organizing activities.

To sum up this section, there appears to be a convergence around trust as both a complex and dynamic process, and a calculative, cognitive choice behaviour. A few established definitions are associated with these and are largely accepted by the academic

community. However, despite all the conceptualizing surrounding trust and the empirical studies purporting to investigate trust, there is an emerging consensus recognizing that we know comparatively little about how trust is actually created by actors when organizing their lives (Kramer, 1999; Möllering, 2001 & 2006). Social and cultural contexts are regarded as vital for the study of trust (Child & Möllering, 2003), hence we attempt to study trust within the context of boundaries.

Perspectives on Boundaries

Research involving boundaries has tended to focus on employee behaviour (e.g. Adams, 1976; Leifer & Huber, 1977), structure (e.g. Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992), boundary-spanning activities (e.g. Adams, 1980; Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Lovett, Harrison & Virick, 1997; Russ, Galang & Ferris, 1998; Kiessling, Harvey & Garrison, 2004; Williams, 2002), labour negotiations (e.g. Kochan, 1975; Friedman & Podolny, 1992), innovation (e.g. Tushman, 1977), and performance (e.g. Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). Traditional organizational boundaries of hierarchy, function and geography are said to be disappearing, to be replaced by new boundaries which are intangible and reflect the dimensions of authority, task identification, politics and individual identity (e.g. Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick & Kerr, 2002; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992). The increase in inter-organizational activity has seen the emergence of the agent conceptualized as the ‘boundary-spanner’, whose role is to form relationships with other ‘boundary spanners’ to develop effective networks (Lovett, et al., 1997; Williams, 2002). Boundaries have also been conceptualized as peripheries (see *Long Range Planning Special Issue*) as a way of representing organizational phenomena that do not quite exist but most people would agree are there.

Atkinson (2004) asserts that trust is increasingly seen in relational terms and that relationships are not fixed and conducted within immediate communities, but span intra- and inter-organizational boundaries. Zucker, Darby, Brewer and Peng (1996) see organizational boundaries as influencing, and in some cases determining, who should be trusted, as they define the formal rules and procedures governing behaviour. While Nooteboom (2002: 107) feels intra- and inter-organization trust cannot be simply

delineated because the two are not fixed, assigning the decision of where to locate the boundary to the organization, but cautions that as conditions change this boundary is subject to shift. Boundary-spanners are tasked with representing the trustful face of an organization as it seeks to establish trusting relations with others. The success of this is said to rely on the trusting relationships the boundary-spanner creates within and across his/her own organization (Sydow, 1998). Sydow's reasoning appears to suggest that trust between organizations is intimately related to trust within organizations and that high levels of trust internally transfer to high external perceptions of the organization as trustworthy.

'Real' boundaries are those that have a physical form or representation whose purpose is to separate or unite, differentiate or connect actors to other aspects of their environments (Halley, 1997). Externally, real boundaries are understood to be where a company encounters and interacts with its external suppliers, customers and stakeholders. Internally, real boundaries exist between geographic locations, business units and departments. Whilst real boundaries are not fixed their form is relatively stable; they can be altered by re-organizing the internal structure or by re-negotiating external conditions. Real boundaries mediate the behaviour of those who operate within them and exert a controlling influence on day-to-day activities. However, the influence real boundaries exert is not uniform and consistent, their meaning is not fixed and immobile, but assigned through human agency. Physical and representational boundaries are interpreted by individuals and groups, who confer meaning on them that facilitates their decision-making and action. Ultimately, the meaning assigned by each individual will be unique to them, but there has to be enough shared meaning and understanding if effective coordination and collaboration is to take place. An organization chart is a structural representation of the real boundaries inside an organization, enough must be shared about what this means for effective communication to take place and for people to know what lines of responsibility exist, but each person views it from their own unique perspective. Individual meaning making of an organization chart will be influenced by many contextual qualities, not least the actor's view of the hierarchical nature of the organization such a chart can also represent.

'Perceived' boundaries by contrast, have no form that can be presented representationally, as their structure is too loose and ill-defined, they are not solid compositions that can be seen or touched. They are phenomena of the mind, but more importantly are social products, in that they are pluralities. Perceived boundaries are social constructions located in a particular place and created in a particular time; they exist as long as they are useful constructs for people to organize by. Perceived boundaries are created to allow people to act; they are interpreted into being to fulfil a temporary need. Notions of intra- and inter- have little impact on perceived boundaries as they are context-specific and are constructed to facilitate action within a particular micro-setting. They exist outside of formal rules and structures, although they impact upon how these are operationalized. They are required in order that relationships can be formed, so that the conventions and norms of behaviour can be established. Where enough of the perceived boundary is shared the relationship can progress, when a dislocation occurs new boundaries have to be established or the relationship falters. Perceived boundaries have no fixed state but are constantly being made and remade, and are constituted by those that engage with them. In describing such boundaries as 'perceived', we imply they have 'become' and are fully formed: better to consider them in a constant state of 'becoming' (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and describe their creation as 'perceiving' boundaries. Conceptualizing boundaries as 'perceived' encourages questions about *what* they are, seeing them as in a mode of 'perceiving' leads to inquiries around *how* and *why* they are being created.

Considering the two categories of boundaries raises questions about how decisions and actions are enacted within them. Treating real boundaries as perceptions and perceived boundaries as if they are real can lead to a lack of shared understanding over differing interpretations. The boundaries between organizations are mostly assumed to be real, but increasingly in network type organizations some staff work permanently, or for the majority of their time, in one of the other network organizations. For them, working in these peripheral positions means notions of real organizational boundaries hold little meaning. Regarding perceived boundaries as if they are real can lead to confusion over

where the boundaries, and what constitutes appropriate behaviour, lie. Our understanding of where to ‘draw the line’ may not be shared, this can lead to misunderstandings and betrayal of confidences. Similarly, when a perceived boundary is made real, or a real boundary removed, perceived boundaries may still exist. For example, a real departmental boundary may be dissolved through a re-organization, but the perception of that boundary may remain amongst those it affected. The idea that boundaries can be opened and closed at will comes from systems theory (e.g. Brown, 1966). However, this reasoning seems only appropriate when discussing some real boundaries, as perceptions cannot be opened and closed, as individuals are always perceiving. Perceptions can be altered rather than closed. Whether a boundary is real or perceived, open or closed, the key issue affecting human agency is how socially sited and discursively produced meaning is assigned to it and what interpretations are made from it.

Social constructionism

There exists a growing recognition amongst scholars that organizational phenomena emerge as a result of the collective acts of social construction. However, frequently the broader and deeper consequences of acknowledging the social and constructive nature of how experience is made meaningful remain under-examined (Hammersley, 2003). What we see appearing is a sort of social constructionism-lite, where experience is acknowledged to be socially produced, but within fixed contexts and through a process of rational choice. For something to be perceived as a construct its essential quality is held to be the product of the human mind. Without the active engagement of the mind there is no product to explore. Therefore, what is produced is part of and cannot be separated from, the human that imagined it into being. By adding the adjective ‘social’ in this context, the creation of the construct is held to be polyphonic, meaning the product of more than one human ‘voice’ (Czarniawska, 2001). Constructed phenomena do not exist independently or objectively to be discovered or acquired, but are subjectively created by actors to order and make sense of realities (Dey, 2002). Subjectivity, in this case, refers to the incomplete nature of knowledge individuals possess as they collectively create their worlds. Individuals compose phenomena socially through talk, text and word-play. These constructs are said to be shaped by and shape the ongoing discourses of the

communities from which they originate and are therefore more commonly seen as products of communities than individuals (Czarniawska, 2001; Gioia, 2003; Pozzebon, 2004).

Perceiving trust and boundaries as constituted by social construction offers a language by which their characteristics can be described that enhances our understanding of their properties and use. It reminds us that trust and boundaries are constructed within social settings and are therefore formed by their contexts. Child and Möllering's (2003: 71) assertion that trust is a social construct provides a means by which the trustee's traditional role as a passive recipient of trust can be reframed into one that perceives him/her as active in the creation of a trustful situation. While this conceptualizes trust as the product of more than one 'voice', it does not follow that each 'voice' is equal in the construction of trust. Accordingly, we disagree with Lewicki and Bunker (1996) who suggest that trustors only work actively on trust when trust has to be repaired. The concept of power is present in all occasions where there is more than one human involved and typically in such circumstances there will be an imbalance of power. Constructionism advances the idea that actors cannot decide when power will or will not be present in any interaction, as it is always there like all contextual mediating qualities. This means that in the construction of trust asymmetrical power relations exist that influence how trust is conceptualized and interpreted. Even asymmetrical power relations are not fixed, so when a manager is interacting with a staff member, the manager is assigned a positive power imbalance through the hierarchical structure of an organization. However, during the same interaction the manager can be on the receiving end of a negative power imbalance as the staff member may hold specialist or valuable knowledge the manager does not possess but needs in order to fulfil some task.

Day and Schoemaker (2004: 117) identify a similarly involved role when they state that a new boundary is created every time an actor turns his/her head to look at one. This suggests that boundaries only exist where there is a human mind creating it. Without the active engagement of the human there is no perceived boundary. As products of human minds, such constructions are influenced by the many and varied motivations and

intentions – noble and otherwise – of those doing the constructing. Constructions are not fixed and immobile but temporally-bound, constantly made and remade (Czarniawska, 2001). As motivations, emotions or intentions change, so too will boundaries, and how they are understood and interpreted. Meaning is not held within them to be uncovered, but continually assigned and reassigned as interpretations are crafted by actors in multiple shared and, at times, conflicting contexts. Critical hermeneutics (Prasad, 2002; Schwandt, 2000) teaches us that meanings are always open to reinterpretation, and that even those that create boundaries do not fully know the meanings of their own creations.

Socially constructed boundaries are subjectively held sites whose existence is dependent upon those who operate within them finding them a useful means through which to order their experiences. As such boundaries do not ‘exist’ in the same way that ‘real’ boundaries do, they are interpreted into being. Through interpreting, actors attempt to make sense of boundaries in a way that familiarizes the unfamiliar. However, familiarization should not necessarily be understood as shared. What is familiar will be influenced by historical, political, and cultural practices and discourses; and these are unlikely to be shared in any complete way, although it is likely that in most situations enough is shared to make boundaries familiar in a socially meaningful way. ‘Real’ boundaries may exist in a physical sense, but like socially constructed boundaries, their meanings are not fixed and are just as open to subjective reinterpretations. The Berlin Wall existed as a ‘real’ physical boundary, but held different and competing meanings for individuals in different communities. Undoubtedly, ‘real’ boundaries encourage dominant meanings to emerge, but their emergence shouldn’t be confused with immutable truth, dominant meanings are still social constructions and as such can change.

Sensemaking

Weick (1995) asserts sensemaking never starts or ends, and that we are always engaged in making sense of our environments, and have been doing so all our lives. When making sense, actors interpret selected cues which then influence what and how meaning is constructed and subsequently, what sense is made (Ericson, 2001; Schneider, 1997). Although sensemaking is typically a social act the sense made by an individual is

ultimately particular to him/her, because cues have no fixed meaning but have meaning assigned during social exchanges. What a particular cue or signal means may be discussed and its meaning agreed, but how that fits into an overall worldview will ultimately be unique to each person as individual histories are different. Within groups, there needs to exist enough shared understanding to allow effective group functioning. Groups have different requirements for shared understanding and meaning. Tightly controlled groups, such as surgical teams or aircraft pilot teams, need to share high levels of meaning to function effectively. Whereas more loosely coupled groups, academics at conferences for example, need to share basic understandings, but thrive on their different interpretations of the same concepts.

Sensemaking challenges the role of purpose as a significant factor in understanding behaviour and replaces this with a conceptualization of socio-psychological behaviour as driven by a need to make lived experiences meaningful (Boland, 1984; Vaara, 2003). During sensemaking individuals are seen to be constructing and maintaining their own identities, and use their sense of who they are as a power-affect to influence the sensemaking of others (Currie & Brown, 2003). Brown (2000) notes there is a reasonable consensus that narrative is the privileged form of sensemaking between individuals (e.g. Brown, 1986; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor, 2004). There is a strong role allocated toward conversation as the main medium through which sense is made, but other forms of narrative such as; stories, all forms of text, self-talk and symbolism are also employed by actors to make sense of equivocal cues.

Although we are said to always be making sense of our environments, there are times when our sensemaking capacities are heightened. Sensemaking activities are triggered into action during times of perceived threat (Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993), surprise (Maitlis, 2005), or strategic change (Rouleau, 2005), when agents experience an increased need for sense to be made as emotions intensify (George & Jones, 2001). It is likely that during such moments decisions and actions become more critical to the welfare of individuals and groups. These acts are undertaken after sense has been made.

It is for this reason that organizations who want to improve the decision making of their managers would be better advised to focus on the effectiveness of their sensemaking prior to decision making. To address decision-making without attending to the sense managers make prior to the decision misses the point about how decisions are made. Good decision-making can result in undesirable outcomes because of ineffective sensemaking. Weick (1996: 147) offers the view that sensemaking can be improved by attending to the following capacities; improvisation, wisdom, respectful interaction and communication. A collapse in sensemaking occurs when individuals and groups can no longer make effective sense of the cues they are encountering. When this happens individuals are no longer able to create meaningful worlds allowing them to act. This can result in paralysis with agents unable to act, or actions being taken that we are unable to understand.

The social and constructive nature of sensemaking means that its potency is not judged in terms of accuracy, or whether the sense made is valid against some normative standard. Sensemaking is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention and instrumentality (Brown, 2000; Weick, 1995). Ultimately, good sensemaking is achieved through bricolage (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Weick, 1993 & 2001) and is said to produce accounts that are socially acceptable, authentic, credible and useful.

If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? The answer is, something that perceives plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story.

Weick, 1995: 60-61

Trust, boundaries and sensemaking

Weick (1995: xi) tells his reader "...you have, after all been doing sensemaking all your life...". Adobor (2005) asserts the creation of trust may be viewed as a sensemaking process, which raises the question; have we been doing trust all our lives? One way of looking at trust is to see it as a socio-psychological process that we develop from a very young age. Children learn to trust when they are making sense of their environments,

understanding who their parents and close family are, and what relationships around them exist. Later, they develop the ability to demonstrate their trustworthiness to others during their early attempts at social play. Through this socialization process they are communicating that they can be trusted and begin making their first tentative steps towards trusting people new to them who they encounter in a variety of different contexts. These early attempts at trusting sometimes backfire when the trust assigned to another turns out to be misplaced. Weick (1995) considers the first act of sensemaking in new situations to be crucial as this is felt to frame all future cycles of sensemaking. When encountering new experiences, initial cues are ordered into a cognitive schema that provides a frame for organizing subsequent signs. By the same token, an initial act of trusting may influence subsequent acts of trusting within similar contexts. If an initial act of trusting proves to be well-placed this may encourage further acts of the same. The opposite also appears to be reasonable, an initial act of trusting that backfires may make future acts more difficult.

Trust and sensemaking seem able to share a suitable description as being “frames of the mind” (Weick, 1995: xii). An individual’s propensity to trust is socially influenced but unique to them. The likelihood that an individual will be trusted is mediated by many contributing factors, but is ultimately a result of the heuristic sensemaking agents engage in when interpreting who a person is and what he/she represents. Trust influences sensemaking in that how trustworthy a person is and how readily he/she trusts contributes to the overall sense made about a person. Trust can be a product of sensemaking because the result of sensemaking can be a decision to trust. So trust can be both a cue towards and a product of sensemaking. Conversely, the decision to trust or not to trust must involve some sense having been made. Trust, it seems, is not possible without sensemaking, and sensemaking is not possible without trust, even if it is only trust in oneself.

Sensemaking occurs in different contexts and these influence how sense is made. Boundaries provide trust with an added contextual nuance that affects how trust is constructed. Sensemaking is a social process involving trust that sometimes results in the

decision to trust or not to trust. The trust literature seems intent on categorizing trust as, for example; psychological, choice behaviour, dispositional, history-based, category-based, role-based and rule-based (e.g. Kramer, 1999). Categories may be necessary in order that we can structure our research outputs, but we should not forget that such categorizing is a product of human agency. To examine trust from a social constructionist perspective however, would put forward the argument that it is not possible to separate out one form of trust from another, and that all these (and more) forms of trust may be present, unequally, during an experience where trust is relevant. One way in which it may be useful to consider the complexity this suggests is to move from describing such experiences from using nouns to verbs. As a noun, trust is seen as a state – fixed and static – whereas, as a verb trusting envisages processes continually at play within the labour of organizing (Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003).

Trusting may be considered a process that never begins or ends, but is always present during our organizing. There are clearly times when intense emotions mean the need to trust others or to be trusted is heightened and during these situations our trusting sensitivities are triggered into action. At these times trusting doesn't just begin from scratch, it is best thought of as a capability that is engaged when needed to fulfil a particular need, which then subsides, but never goes away, once the immediate need has been fulfilled. In this way, our everyday life experiences are continually adding to or taking away from our tendency to trust in particular situations. The experiences we have continuously, or observe, or hear about from others, influence how we will react when we next are faced with a situation that requires our trust. Additionally, we are constantly noticing cues about how we need to behave or present ourselves if we want to be trusted in different future contexts.

It is through understanding sensemaking as a social construction on this basis that several factors have been identified that are felt to contribute disproportionately to how individuals make sense in social settings and which may be instructive to examine with trusting in mind. Scholars of sensemaking may study one particular nuanced characteristic in their research, but are always aware that many others are present in any

sensemaking episode, and for this reason alone, the narratives produced offer only a partial account, not the whole story of sensemaking.

Identity: Weick (1995: 20) claims identities are constructed out of the process of interaction, multiple interactions witness individuals shifting among multiple definitions of self. Sensemaking is closely linked with social identity construction where who I am influences what sense is made, but also what is encountered influences who I am. This suggests trusting is different depending upon who I am and that by trusting or not trusting I am constituting myself and my own identity. Conversely, if I am not considered trustworthy this impacts upon my self-image. I can be surprised when I am not trusted causing me to reflect upon the possible reasons, or, not being trusted can confirm my own low self esteem. In the same situation a person could be a colleague, competitor and friend, as well as member of the same sports club, political sympathiser and fellow cruciverbalist. On what basis is trust established and with whom? Dutton and Dukerich (1991) assume organizations have identities and that these are what its members believe are its central, enduring and distinctive characters, these are felt to filter and mold actors' interpretations of situations they encounter. Where a simple two-way interaction takes place between representatives from different organizations, identities complexify raising the following question: with which of my multiple identities am I trusting which of your multiple identities, and in what way do our organization's multiple identities influence that?

Sensegiving: This is said to predominantly occur when a privileged group or individual seeks to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred organizational reality (Ericson, 2001; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensegiving objectifies sense and seems to indicate a desire for control over the social sensemaking processes of others. The view that sensegiving is needed can be interpreted as demonstrating a lack of trust in those who it is aimed at, for if I trusted them and their meaning and sensemaking abilities I would not need to try and impose my version of reality on them. Similarly, trust in the sensegivers is assumed, otherwise their version of reality will not be trusted and will, in all likelihood, be ignored. Snell (2002) notes that

top-down sensegiving may discourage critical inquiry, leading to one version of reality being presented as natural and inevitable. In terms of trust this raises thoughts concerning how the frame of mind that says this person, organization or piece of technology can be trusted/not trusted is given or passed on by one individual to another. An example may help illustrate this: a truck driver encounters many different people in multiple organizations as he/she delivers goods and will have formed opinions about the trustworthiness of these people. An internal reorganization may now mean the route is taken on by someone else. The new person may be given formal information by his/her manager concerning the integrity of the people or organization he/she will encounter, but typically will seek out the previous driver for his/her views. These can be considered formal and informal sensegiving interactions, where the recipient receives the different realities of the manager and the truck driver, and draws from them to construct his/her own temporary version of reality allowing agency.

Narrative: A narrative sensitivity assumes organizing emerges through the talk, storytelling and discursive exchanges of agents (Robichaud, et al., 2004). Narrative is a mode of knowing and understanding, as well as a mode of communication (Czarniawska, 1997 & 2004; Fisher, 1984; Maines, 1993). It is through narratives that we interpret and understand our worlds, and it is also the means by which we talk about our realities with others. Sensemaking is seen as largely a narrative process where individuals engage others in talking about phenomena in order that it can be made meaningful. Even when we are alone we practice self-talk inside our heads to make sense of what we are encountering or to reflect on what we have experienced. To consider trusting as a narrative phenomena draws attention to the conversations actors engage in. The conversations that influence trusting are not limited to those a truck driver conducts with his/her manager or with the previous driver of the route. What studies of sensemaking have highlighted is the importance of spouses, friends and the media in how meaningful realities are constructed. Like most other people, truck drivers tell stories about their work at home, with friends and at roadside service areas or rest stops, with other truck drivers. These stories do not mirror reality, but act as a filter through which events are ordered to make them reasonable and manageable allowing action to be taken (Boje,

2001). Subsequent actions are mediated by the trusting conceptualizations formed and forming during these conversations.

Power, legitimacy and verisimilitude: The process of sensemaking is mediated by power relations socially and historically constituted (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) and therefore sensemaking itself is a power-affect. No sense can be made without power having influenced its creation. Organizational texts in the form of annual reports or information brochures, for example, are power-laden artefacts in the way that they present a particular view or perspective that is intended to influence the sensemaking of the reader. Such documents proclaim their legitimacy through their layout and the use of seals, signs and symbols. The photograph and signature of the Chair or Chief Executive on a document is meant to convey legitimacy and the message that this is a truthful rendering of reality because otherwise he/she would not be so personally attached to it. However, such documents are, in fact, works of fiction and the authors that produced them fiction writers, in the way that the text is made up rather than is false (Barry & Elmes, 1997). Narrative truth, in the form of words spoken, imagined or written needs to be reframed in terms of its verisimilitude. Verisimilitude refers to the subjective resonance that occurs between the listener's/reader's experience of the world and the narrator's rendition of it (Bruner, 1991; Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). For a document to exhibit verisimilitude it must convince the reader that it conforms to the conventions of the genre (Brown, 2004) and in doing so establishes its claims towards legitimacy and truth.

Ambiguity, equivocality and uncertainty: Weick (1995) considers ambiguity and equivocality as both initiating sensemaking. However, he draws a distinction between the two; ambiguity can mean the presence of multiple meanings and a lack of clarity; whereas, equivocality can mean too many meanings but no lack of certainty. Therefore, recognising a situation as highly ambiguous can have two meanings for managers; confusion created by multiple meanings, or lack of clarity caused by ignorance (Bruner, 1991; Weick, 1995). But a situation characterized as equivocal is one with too many meanings only. Constructed realities are constituted by equivocality, for if this were not

the case, a single shared reality would exist that, once it had its ambiguities stripped away, would be open to a single interpretation. Concerning trust, boundaries are conceptualized as either ambiguous locations containing multiple meanings and a lack of clarity, or, equivocal phenomena with too many meanings. Either scenario suggests thought and action concerning them to be highly particular and subjective.

Implications for research

Social constructionism is a research perspective that characterises phenomena, such as trust, as constituted by human voice. It also encourages reflexivity on the part of researchers and practitioners as it highlights who we are influences what we create. Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje (2004) assert our research texts are as much about our lives as those we study. The research discourse surrounding trust, like that of sensemaking, is itself a construction created by the leading researchers in the field. Their individual and collective perceptions of what constitutes knowledge and knowing have helped to create the current body of scholarly output on the subject. Notions of inter-organizational, intra-organizational trust and boundaries etc. are categories created by researchers to help structure their research reports. Such categories help scholars to formulate their research questions, but may not necessarily help produce better research. For example, sensemaking research is typically not conducted inter- or intra-organizationally, or within boundaries, real or imagined. These constructs are not academic truths that all researchers must conduct their study within. Rather, the dominant voices within this field conduct their research of actors' sensemaking within different, unique contexts. Each of these locations are sites where actors are engaged in organizing their lives, from firefighters in the American Grasslands (Weick, 1993 & 1996) to workers on the shop-floor at Fiat (Patriotta, 2003a & b).

A social constructionist research agenda would privilege understanding trusting, or trust-in-the-making. Constructionist researchers are interested in how actors conceptualize trust and what influence *they* feel it plays in their organizing activities. Ideally, this form of research is longitudinal, with the researcher spending extended periods of time in the field with the research participants. The researcher's role is to help subjects reflect upon

their experiences and to explore with them a deeper level of understanding of their own actions and decisions. Researchers must recognize that their presence influences what stories are told and enacted (see Möllering, 2006), so what emerges from interview encounters are co-constructions rather than the true accounts of individuals' experience of trust. The data creation site is a social construction where notions of power and identity, for example, influence what is jointly produced. Social constructionist researchers conducting interviews acknowledge that the interview is a unique encounter. Were the same interviewer and interviewee to hold another conversation using the same questions or prompts the following day, the results would be different, because it is another unique encounter. This does not invalidate the data, but means that the data researchers then draw from is used to produce one story of trust-in-the-making, that is not *the* story, but one of many possible stories. The contributions to knowledge this produces are rich descriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Stake, 2000; Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004) of actors trusting and being trusted, their reflections on this and the researcher's critical analysis of this.

We support the claims made elsewhere (e.g. Child & Möllering, 2003; Möllering, 2001; Möllering, et al., 2004) for a plurivocal trust research agenda. The words researchers use in their descriptions are not neutral, the dominant discourse surrounding trust has been largely positivist privileging a mechanistic vocabulary. Typically, the terms used when discussing trust betray the ontological position of the speaker, commonly, we “build trust”, “win trust”, “invest trust”, “ground trust”, “maintain trust”, “exchange trust”, “repair trust”, “breach trust”, “produce trust”, “grant trust”, “lose trust”, “destroy trust”, “drive trust”, “manage trust”, “manufacture trust” and trust is seen as a “mechanism” that can be “absent” from relationships, but when it is present can be “measured”. These terms, to a greater or lesser degree, commodify trust turning it into a thing that is somehow separate from humanity. It is objectified and made machine-like. The current series of ESRC funded workshops in the UK are concerned with “Building, maintaining and repairing trust...”. Vehicles are built, maintained and repaired, but is trust? We are not advocating for the suppression of positivist research, or for its dominant position to be supplanted by a dominant social constructionist ontology. Much like John Van Maanen

(1998: xii), we do not see quantitative research as qualitative research's "evil twin". We embrace all research perspectives and see them offering alternative conceptualizations adding richness to the academic debate.

What we call for is a research agenda that, elsewhere, is termed a "Re-turn to practice" and is concerned with understanding organizing as it happens, where it happens (EGOS, 2006). In the field of strategy this has led some scholars to reframe it from its traditional conceptualization as a product or plan, to the notion that strategy is something managers do. This leads to the idea of strategizing or strategy-as-practice (e.g. Whittington, 1996, 2003 & 2006). We have reframed trust as trusting or trust-in-the-making as a way of representing trust as something continually present in agent interactions. Frequently in the literature trust is perceived as a dynamic phenomena, but then actors are said to be in a "state" or "phase" of trust (e.g. Rousseau, et al., 1998) that is somehow free of context (Atkinson, 2004). After all, we engage in the dynamic act of "undressing" before we reach a state of being "undressed" and we do so in different contexts with different meanings. While it may not be the authors' intentions to suggest that the state or phase is static, it might be considered that an alternative use of language be developed to more effectively communicate the dynamism of trust. The practice agenda is characterized as an interest in how everyday acts of organizing are enacted and a desire to understand contextualized meaning (Greene, 2000). This type of research is frequently conducted using in-depth case studies and ethnographies, which are seen as the most effective means by which knowledge about practice may be constructed within the contexts of organizing (e.g. Johnson, et al., 2003; Knights & Mueller, 2004; Lowe & Jones, 2004).

Social constructionism is often criticised along three fronts; for allowing an "anything goes" approach to research and its findings, for not holding relevance for practitioners because generalizability is not claimed, and for leading to academic navel-gazing through over-reflexivity. First, traditional notions of validity have to be disregarded in favour of the subjective evaluation of research reports in terms of their authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Mueller & Carter, 2005), usefulness (Burr, 1995; Mahoney, 1993), credibility (Janesick, 2000), verisimilitudiness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), criticality

(Mueller & Carter, 2005), hegemony (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000), and for their plausibility and credibility (Brown & Jones, 2000). Phillips (1995) suggests the reader of a qualitative research script should be able to learn something about him or herself through the act of reading. Second, the objective is to produce rich or thick descriptions about real experiences of organizing that ‘speak’ to the reader, but the job of generalizing is not one for the author, but the reader (Czarniawska, 2003: 354). The transfer of knowledge from one context to another requires understanding of both contexts, at best, the social constructionist researcher can claim partial knowledge of the context of the original site of their research, but no knowledge of the context of the reader. This does not mean such research is of no relevance to practitioners, but that relevance is co-constructed between reader and text as the reader engages in a virtual dialogue with the script. Third, over-reflexivity can paralyse leaving researchers unable to act (Czarniawska, 2003), but ignoring the role and influence researchers bring to bare on their research can lead to them failing to consider how they make sense of what they encounter. Lincoln and Guba (2000) believe that we not only bring ourselves to our research, but constitute ourselves by it.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed and analysed trust within and across boundaries through the lens of sensemaking and the perspective of social constructionism. Research into the notion of trust can perhaps be described as deep but not particularly broad. There exists a consistent call for research that moves the debate on from the themes that have dominated academic inquiry thus far. We have responded to this call and have looked to problematize trust, raising more questions than we have provided answers. While trust has been recently characterized as a social construction, we understand social construction as an ontological position through which all organizational phenomena are experienced. Socially constructed trust is, therefore, constituted within socially constructed contexts. What is important within this framing is not whether such contexts are boundaries, real or perceived, or whether the contexts are inter or intra-organizational. What constructionism teaches is that contexts are continually being formed and that it is

the meaning that is assigned to such contexts that is the key determinant influencing human agency. Meanings are not fixed but are perpetually re-assigned as contexts continue to evolve and histories change. What the social constructionist researcher is interested in is how actors interpret their contexts, making the unfamiliar familiar, and how they construct and what meaning they assign to their own experiences.

Through the socio-psychological process of sensemaking, individuals interpret their worlds into meaningful schemas that allow them to take action. Trust and sensemaking seem to be two processes that share an intimate relationship. Trust influences what sense is constructed and, it seems reasonable to suggest, trust emerges through individual and collective sensemaking. From a socio-psychological perspective, it seems difficult to conceive of trust being created without sense having been made. By considering trust as a product of and contributor towards sensemaking we begin broadening the debate surrounding trust, enriching it and opening up the possibilities for exciting new research possibilities. By bringing the knowledge and experience of a related field to bear on trust we raise new questions and challenge existing assumptions concerning the state of the topic. Equally, the sensemaking research community can benefit from studies of sensemaking from trust perspectives. Studies that seek to measure sensemaking are very rare, far more common are empirical investigations of sensemaking, as it happens, within specific contexts. In these studies the researcher(s) focuses on a particular aspect of sensemaking, endeavouring to understand this in more depth and thereby contribute to the much larger body of knowledge on the topic. Sensemaking research tends to focus on nuance within interactions and relationships, and on the distinct rather than the generalizable.

In a further effort to broaden the academic discussion on trust we embrace and advocate the adoption of the practice agenda that is becoming increasingly prevalent in the arena of organization studies. The practice agenda represents a move towards understanding how individuals and collectives *do* organizing in their everyday experiences. When actors engage in their organizing activities trust must play a substantive part. A research gap is identified that links trust into the practice agenda. New conceptualizations of trusting or

trust-in-the-making are required to inform empirical investigations that aim to get close to understanding how trust is created in real time in real situations. This paper offers a tentative step towards providing such a conceptualization. This agenda privileges a research approach that values intimate observation of organizational members' situated use and collective manipulation of an array of tools, techniques, objects, vocabularies, and complex bodies of knowledge in realizing a 'practice'. Rather than seeking to impose abstract theories on the actions of practitioners, it sees the research subjects as co-constructors of knowledge within the research setting. The role of the researcher becomes that of rendering practice faithfully and then using his/her best intellect to describe and analyse what has happened. The chief contribution this makes for practitioners is in helping them to critically reflect on their actions, and on the thoughts, emotions and theories that mediate them.

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