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Practice(s) of Trusting. Commentary on Gil Eyal, Larry Au and Cristian Capotescu's "Trust Is a Verb!"

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Abstract

This comment on Eyal et al.'s (2024) "Trust Is a Verb!" supports their view of trusting as a skillful, context- and time-dependent practice. It argues that their approach is reconcilable with the literatures they criticize as well as work they have not taken into account. The comment points out that Eyal et al. eschew the core question of what "trusting" is about and they remain vague on how trusting as practice turns into discernable practices.

Keywords: Trust; leap of faith; practice theory; active trust; trust research.

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1 Introduction

In this commentary on Gil Eyal, Larry Au and Christian Capotescu's (2024) essay "Trust Is a Verb!: A Critical Reconstruction of the Sociological Theory of Trust", I will proceed as follows: First, in this introduction, I will summarize my reading of their main arguments. Second, I will support their view of trusting as a skillful, context- and time-dependent practice. Third, I will argue that their approach is not as deviant from prior research as they claim, but reconcilable with the literatures they criticize as well as work they have not taken into account. Finally, I conclude that trust research is a diverse ecosystem that would welcome Eyal et al.'s core contribution.

In the opening of their essay, Eyal et al. portray extant trust research as delusional and lost. They liken its conceptual maturity to the times when physics used the construct of ether. They attest an impasse around two untenable theoretical views of trust. They claim to propose a new way forward by studying "*trusting* as a practice" (p. 171, emphasis in original). A core idea they are going to build on is that "the problem faced by individuals is not whether to trust or not, but how to trust in a way that is accountable to themselves and to others as distinct from both blind faith and debilitating mistrust" (p. 172).

The first main part of their essay is framed as a "critical reconstruction" (p. 172) of the sociological literature on trust. Eyal et al. take issue with a line of research they label as focused on trust as an individual attitude. They criticize the use of Likert scales in trust surveys, because too much depends on the wording of items, the scores do not mean much in themselves and even less so as predictors of actual behavior. Essentially, they say that this approach is too static and too much predefined by researchers. They see this at odds with how people really come to trust.

Next, Eyal et al. refer to work that treats trust as a leap of faith. They accuse research in his vein of its, allegedly, functionalist doctrine and objectifying figment of "trust itself" (p. 175), resulting from the "scholastic fallacy" of abstract theorizing without grasping — similar to the attitudinal approach — how people accomplish and maintain trust in practice.

Thus having slashed and burned what Eyal et al. appear to have encountered as the dominant vegetation in the land of sociological trust research, they set out to plant "trust methods" (p. 179) as an alternative approach. They mix the formulation of abstract elements of their own approach with illustrations from their empirical research on Long COVID patients. The key elements are: to refer to the verb *trusting* and a logic of practice; to recognize people's need to trust responsibly and not blindly; to take into account institutionalized frames; to see trusting and trustees not as scripted but as situated; and to be sensitive to "timing, sequence, interval, speed and duration" (p. 184). How Long COVID patients (actually) trust, according to this account, cannot be explained by attitude surveys nor by a leap-of-faith attestation.

Eyal et al. announce that "there is only *trusting*: practical skilled action, partially relying on existing institutionalized frames, but ultimately giving rise to a complex, messy, eventful process wherein explicit reasons and tacit habits, skepticism and confidence, mistrust and little 'leaps of faith' are all intertwined" (p. 187, emphasis in original). They use the concluding part of their essay (pp. 187–188) to lash out on the "prodigious academic and non-academic industry" that they claim perpetuates the rejectable "trust itself"-approach and does not appreciate trust as a practice, as the authors seem to believe.

2 Appreciation

However, though I am one of the targets of Eyal et al.'s quest, there is much I appreciate about their "trust method" approach. I think we are playing for the same team. Beyond the few pages from my 2006 book that they cite (Möllering, 2006), I have been arguing for very similar advances in trust research. Let me just mention that I have pointed out that "*trust research* should aim to study instances of trust assuming idiosyncratic praxis" (Möllering, 2001, p. 414, emphasis in original), which "requires a *process perspective*, obtaining a rich (typically qualitative) picture of actual *trust experiences*, understanding the *embeddedness* of the relationships under investigation and taking into account the *reflexivity* not only in trust development as such but also in the research interaction itself" (Möllering, 2006, p. 152, emphasis in original).

Incidentally, a chapter of mine in one of the (suspicious) handbooks from the "trust industry" criticizes surveys, similar to how Eyal et al. do it, and proposes: "A shared starting point for highlighting the process character of trust could be to speak of 'trusting', not 'trust' (see Wright & Ehnert, 2010, p. 116)" (Möllering, 2013, p. 286). The chapter outlines five different process views of trusting — one of them essentially a practice approach — and a key conclusion is the following:

> All process views move away from the search for solid trust bases that enable trustful expectations toward an analysis of trusting as continuously (re)making the paths, information, experiences, identities and structures that the willingness to be vulnerable in the face of uncertainty is entangled with (Möllering, 2013, p. 297).

Hence, I applaud Eyal et al.'s practice focus. I think they point out several important aspects that have not been given enough attention yet and that fertilize our practical understanding of trust. First, the responsibility (or accountability) of the trustor — and not just the trustee — is indeed a feature of trusting and not just a methodological difficulty of post-hoc rationalization or just a challenge to crude leap-of-faith accounts. Trust has to feel "right" especially to the trustor, but also to the trustee and relevant third parties. I would be glad to see an expanded treatment of this aspect, for instance, regarding self-assurance, mutual expectations and reputation.

Second, I am intrigued that Eyal et al. point to institutionalized frames while at the same time challenging pregiven scripts (pp. 181–182). Orthodox institutionalists might see this as a contradiction, but of course in various streams of institutional theory — for example in any version of the Berger & Luckmann (1966) tradition — scripts are never complete, never cover every detail or eventuality, and always get enacted situationally. I agree with Eyal et al. that this also includes the question of who is the trustee. The insight that trusting is, at the same time, embedded and idiosyncratic does not seem very original itself, but combined with the responsibility argument above, it poses an important question that Eyal et al. try to answer, too: If trusting must not be random, how is it shaped?

Third, Eyal et al.'s partial and preliminary answer to this is the most interesting part of their essay (pp. 184–185) which I would love to see in a more elaborated version in the future. From their empirical material, they sketch a temporal analysis of trusting episodes. Referring to the categories of "timing, sequence, interval, speed and duration", Eyal et al. give anecdotal illustrations of how we might better understand how people "accomplish trusting accountably" (p. 172). However, considering the abovementioned claim that there are no pregiven scripts, I wonder if Eyal et al. will be looking for typical temporal patterns of trusting, which people

may be familiar with and draw upon as part of an established "trust method", or if they are going to claim that the temporal variables are inevitably situational and not predictable. As much as I appreciate that trusting is supposed to be responsible, unscripted and eventful, I wonder to what extend the "practice" part of "situated practice" implies that there are patterns, recognizable for the people involved and for any observers.

3 Reconciliation

Eyal et al. present their practice view of trusting as an alternative to prior work on trust that they deem to be flawed. In this section, I will argue that their challenges are misguided and misleading. I will sketch ways in which trusting as skillful practice can be reconciled with other theoretical perspectives. I will endorse a spirit of fruitful diversity for the field of trust research.

3.1 Not "Trust Itself" but the Nature of Trusting

Eyal et al. accuse prior trust conceptualizations of wanting to isolate "trust itself" and effectively take it away from the actors. Trust scripts and the leap of faith are seen as ruling out that it is essentially the actors who accomplish trusting. This conclusion does not hold, because the research they cite is not reductionist in the way Eyal et al. claim. Models of trustworthiness à la Mayer et al. (1995), for example, and the survey items derived from them, do not deny the situatedness of trusting in practice. Leap-of-faith accounts do not reduce trusting to making leaps of faith, but include them as an important element of a comprehensive model (Möllering, 2006). Note that trustworthiness is treated as *perceived by* individual actors and leaps of faith are *taken by* individual actors and not happening to them. No one would think of trying to separate trust(ing) from the actors. Even Simmel's (1990) "surrender of the ego" (p. 179) and Abraham's sacrifice (see Möllering, 2006, pp. 117–118) are expressions of agency — "to believe in someone" — and not of resignation. Hence, there is no search for "trust itself", no idea of a medium detached from actors, and no assumption of a kind of ether.

However, yes, many scholars including myself have been looking to identify the "essence" or "nature" of trust(ing). Eyal et al. do this as well and propose that trusting is essentially skillful situated practice. This is a hollow insight, though. We could come to the same conclusion for infinite other concepts: love, hate, friendship, happiness, violence, peace, power and so on. All of them can be framed as situated practices along the lines of a Bourdieusian logic of practice and it would be insightful to do so. But what are they *essentially about*?

Eyal et al. make no effort in their essay to consider what trusting is about. When they say that trust is about being seen as responsible, that is a derived issue, not the core issue. Responsibility needs a purpose. The same holds for the problem of navigating between mistrust and blind faith. There has to be something behind that problem, making it relevant. So what is trusting as a skill or method *for*? What is the problem trust solves? In contrast to Eyal et al., the work they criticize and many other authors do look for answers to these questions. They conceptualize trust(ing) as a way of dealing with irreducible *uncertainty* and *vulnerability* in *social relations* (e.g. Baier, 1986). This is the core issue which makes trust "trust" and which models of trust(ing) try to capture.

That is, when Mayer et al. (1995) synthesize ability, benevolence and integrity as three dimensions of perceived trustworthiness, they offer a characterization of *what matters* specifically for trusting as distinct from other behaviors. And when I end up identifying "suspension" (which can be imagined as leaps of faith or other metaphors) as the essence of trusting, I point

first and foremost to the problem of radical uncertainty that trust relates to. There is no "trust itself", but there are distinct concepts of "trusting". Hence, we need to investigate the nature of trusting in terms of both *what* and *how*.

3.2 Not "Scholastic Fallacy" but Making Sense of Trusting

Eyal et al.'s portrayal of other work on trust as falling for a scholastic fallacy is unduly polemic and ultimately backfires anyhow when they take the leisure of constructing their own model of trusting and their own interpretations of their survey respondents' trust methods. I propose that we do not dismiss each other's attempts at making sense of trusting. The only fallacy we should worry about is that of claiming exclusive and conclusive truths about trust(ing).

This means that instead of trying to debunk trust-as-attitude and trust-as-leap-of-faith research, Eyal et al. could have discussed which part of trusting as practice these works might be able to capture. For example, work on attitudes or personality could capture predispositions as *elements of situations* in which trusting happens (e.g. Patent & Searle, 2019). And work on leaps of faith could help to capture those most agentic moments when people do go ahead, which Eyal et al. already integrate to some extent. Put differently, trust research at large is a rich resource for making sense of what the skillful practice of trusting entails.

For example, I have been very critical of rational choice accounts of trust as introduced by prominent scholars such as James Coleman and Russell Hardin (Coleman, 1990; Hardin, 2002). However, in the spirit of sensemaking, I would not say they have been *wrong*, but their conceptualizations have been *simplistic* and *incomplete*. I would accept that the interests of trustors and trustees, i.e. how they see their potential gains and losses (Coleman's Bayesian calculation) and the way each other's interests are structured (Hardin's "encapsulated interest") are part of the story, more or less, but not the whole story. I have also been very critical of Oliver Williamson's (1993) attempt to sideline "trust" by claiming that "calculativeness" is a more appropriate concept for what Coleman and Hardin call trust. Yet, Williamson does have a point when he challenges us to see trusting as something that is more than calculation. Eyal et al.'s situated practice view, I think, equally allows for some form of "weighing the odds" by the actors, but would never *reduce* trusting to just that.

I can think of numerous authors, not cited by Eyal et al., who have offered eye-opening accounts of what trusting is about, what is special about it and how it works (e.g. Barber, 1983; Barbalet, 2009; Dibben, 2000; Frederiksen, 2014; Kroeger, 2017; Mizrachi et al., 2007; Nooteboom, 2002; Uslaner, 2002). They all present ideas that underpin, rather than undermine, Eyal et al.'s approach. For reasons of space, I will highlight two sources here that appear to be particularly relevant for trusting as practice:

First, Lucien Karpik (2014) counters Williamson (1993) and frames trust as an operation of "judgement", whereby actors evaluate singular issues by constructing equivalences for idiosyncratic comparisons instead of following a generalized calculation They create "judgement devices" in the face of "singularities". Strikingly similar to Eyal et al., Karpik points out real-life multiplicity and particularism. Trust as judgement closely resembles trusting as skilled situated practice.

Second, not least, because he also challenges other leap-of-faith accounts to some extent, I would like to recommend Adam Seligman's Dewey-inspired framing of "Trust, Experience and Embodied Knowledge" (Seligman, 2021). For Seligman, unlike confidence, trusting means to be able to deal with ambiguity by relying on experience rather than abstract knowledge. Seligman's perspective on trust, already contained in his much earlier writings, too, is concerned

with *how* people actually trust, similar to Eyal et al., but he includes a clear analysis of what trusting is *about*, which is even indicated by the title of his very influential book *The Problem of Trust* (Seligman, 1997).

Situatedness of practice, then, is not just a general fact of all social life. Authors like Seligman or Karpik would contrast forms of interaction that are fairly standardized and can be handled with "confidence" from those interactions that require idiosyncratic "trust" in the face of social uncertainty and vulnerability. Both Seligman and Karpik see actors as capable of accomplishing this. Trusting, one might say, is a familiar way of dealing with the unfamiliar, not following a path but finding a way.

Overall, it does not help to label scholarly attempts at conceptualizing trust as "scholastic fallacy". Perhaps Eyal et al. will agree to seeing research, their own included, as situated practice, too. If so, then we need not evaluate if a particular perspective on trust is right or wrong, but rather what it adds to making sense of trusting as a practice that can take many concrete forms but always relates to uncertainty and vulnerability as generalizable challenges of social relations.

3.3 Not "Trust Scripts" but Active Trusting

The previous section already indicates that when Eyal et al. position their notion of situated practice in opposition to "pregiven scripts" (pp. 181–182) they draw a misleading caricature of the state of trust research, given that Karpik, Seligman and others have in fact made the same point a long time ago. More importantly, ruling out scripts, Eyal et al. actually make it more difficult for themselves to maintain a meaningful practice perspective whereby trusting is at the same time idiosyncratic and embedded. Similarly, a temporal analysis of trusting fits well with prior research on open-ended trust dynamics that also does not envisage inevitable executions of scripts, but recognizes agency as well as emergence (e.g. Klein Woolthuis et al., 2005; Wright & Ehnert, 2010). Once again, Eyal et al. could strengthen their approach by treating script-like accounts of trusting as partial insights into what is *supposed* to be going on and where creative or even *deviant* agency occurs. When they reference Garfinkel, they actually do this to some extent already.

As a final conciliatory move, I therefore suggest that Eyal et al.'s approach might resonate very well with Anthony Giddens's notion of "active trust" (Giddens, 1994). Considering the implications of the nature of trusting as maintaining cooperative social relations in the face of uncertainty and vulnerability, many authors do see trustors as active, not passive. Incidentally, Zucker's (1986) theory of trust production, like Garfinkel (1963), emphasizes shared expectations and notes a historical trend towards more impersonal bases for trust. However, the rise of "institutional-based trust" can be seen already as a creative response to the practical difficulties of taking social relations for grated in modern societies. The institutionalized frames that Eyal et al. also refer to are needed but at the same time not necessarily as stable and reliable as one would hope. Giddens (e.g. 1990, 1991, 1994), as part of his larger project of theorizing late modern societies, refers to "active trust" in order to highlight the very fact that shared expectations — of mutual commitment and care in trustful relationships — have to be constantly worked upon by the actors involved (see also Beckert, 2002). This emphasizes "trust" as verb: what people *do* to maintain "trust" as an attribute of their relationship or even as a principle of interaction in groups, organizations and societies.

Active trusting, as we might call it then, can be studied from the individuals' point of view. In fact, Eyal et al.'s analysis of Long COVID patients is strikingly individualistic. In this, it matches what I have referred to elsewhere as a "trusting as becoming" perspective (Möllering,

2013). Trusting shapes, and is shaped by, social identity. Trusting is an ongoing project of the self (e.g. Giddens, 1991), which is why, indeed, Eyal et al.'s focus on responsibility and accountability is highly meaningful. Whom and how actors trust reflects who they are and who they want to be. By implication, trusting as a skillful practice is not just about how trustors (and trustees) "read" the situation, as it were, but also how they "create" the situation and the relational dynamics for themselves and others (e.g. Henslin, 1968). Social uncertainty and vulnerability, we need to recall, are not just background conditions to this, but the actual issue addressed by trusting.

Active trusting, as a practice, also needs to be studied beyond individuals or, put differently, while trusting can never be detached from actors, trusting draws on context(s), as Eyal et al. would probably agree. Perhaps it is useful to imagine that trustors "activate" context when they accomplish trusting and their trusting actually reflects back into context. Now, this means that research about contexts of trusting is actually very valuable, too. Again, I would recommend being open and lenient to research that, at first, appears to be far away from a practice perspective. For example, measurements of "trust" in "most people" or in certain institutions might be able to capture significant contextual elements, especially in comparative applications (e.g. Uslaner, 2015). As a small illustration, Scandinavians are often very mindful that, according to surveys, they live in high-trust societies and they use this to make sense of their own and others' behavior.

Moreover, it is valuable to study *social systems* not primarily in terms of whether they can be trusted as such, but in terms of how they support practices of trusting (e.g. Sydow, 1998). How much space and which resources to do they actually give to actors so that they can be responsible trustors? Finally, system features, like Eyal et al.'s institutionalized frames, do not equal pregiven scripts, because trusting in action is situated and because, in return, trusting in action shapes the system reflexively, as I would argue from a simplified structuration theoretical perspective (Möllering, 2013).

In sum, if research theorizes trust as scripted, it cannot be the whole story. Empirically, any script-like elements are actually quite interesting as evolving tools for trusting. However, trusting remains an active, not passive practice, also in relation to the definition and application of any scripts.

4 Conclusion

Above, I have attempted appreciating Eyal et al.'s work and reconciling it with other work, including the research they criticize. With this, I intend to make three overall points: Eyal et al. contribute valuable ideas on trusting as practice, but (1) they dismiss other trust research unduly and unfairly; (2) they need to complement trust method with trust purpose; and (3) they can broaden and deepen the grounding in trust research that supports their perspective.

Contrary to Eyal et al.'s own alienating conclusion (pp. 186–188), I see trust as practice as a highly compatible element in the larger ecosystem of trust research. As I have tried to express above, their perspective is not as exotic as they make it seem and there are numerous like-minded scholars to connect with. Moreover, the trust research communities that I have encountered and contributed to over the past few decades are fairly open-minded and pluralistic. I am very surprised that Eyal et al. refer to initiatives such as the *Journal of Trust Research* and various handbooks on trust as examples of an "industry" that pushes a narrow agenda.

My own perception, in contrast, is that even the resourceful *Russel Sage Foundation Series on Trust* was rational choice-biased but still fairly open to all sorts of ideas and perspectives.

Most European edited volumes and special issues were initiated as spaces for exploring and connecting, but not streamlining, various nascent research programs. The *Handbook of Research Methods on Trust*, which I co-edited, was composed to celebrate the large variety of methods used in trust research without favoring one of them over the others (Lyon et al., 2016). And especially the *Journal of Trust Research* has always maintained a policy of multidisciplinarity and plurality of theories, topics, methods and settings. Of course, as editor and contributor, I would say that. Still I am confident that anyone just browsing the Tables of Content of these publications will understand what I mean. And I am sure that if Eyal et al. could move beyond an antagonistic self-serving "critical reflection", their practice approach as such would be very timely and highly welcome.

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