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Trust in interaction studies

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Trust is argued to be essential in fostering cooperative communication, whereas a lack of trust is seen as detrimental to these aims. Over the years, there has been a slow but steady stream of research that has aimed to shed light on how trust is accomplished or broken down through discursive-interactional practices. In this mini review, we examine existing studies that take trust as a topic of investigation using micro-analytic, interactional methods, in order to provide readers with an up-to-date overview on new developments in this important field of research. From this review, we conclude that there exist two different, yet complementary, views on trust: Trust as an interactional principle and trust as a discursively accomplished phenomenon. We not only summarize important discursive work that provides a unique lens on how trust may be established and maintained through verbal and non-verbal resources, but also suggest some of the challenges interactional trust research still faces and some important areas for further investigation in which trust is a major concern.

KEYWORDS

conversation analysis, cooperation in communication, discursive practice, non-verbal communication, relationship, displays of trust, knowledge

1 Introduction: trust in interactional research

It can be argued that, in contemporary societies, increasing tendencies pertaining to 'problems in trust' may be observed. For example, political disenchantment may be partially explained by an insidious erosion in trust concerning political actors (Hay, 2007) and more generally, people are living in what has been termed a 'risk society'/*Risikogesellschaft* (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1990), in which there is a growing lack of trust in experts, and science more generally, to protect them from technological/environmental hazards. Trust is inextricably bound with the quality of human relations; it is recognized, for example, that trust is essential for maintaining and building social relationships and friendships and that breaches of trust place strains on, and can lead to breakdowns in, these relationships (Dunbar, 2018). Establishing trust has been shown to play an essential role in professional-client relations (Mikesell, 2013; Beach and Dozier, 2015; Frankel and Beckman, 2020; Chouliara et al., 2023), which may not only help to facilitate rapport and a safe caring environment, but may also create confidence in the information being presented to clients—see Fonagy and Allison (2014) on *epistemic* trust.

Although an abundance of 'trust research' exists, there are comparatively few studies that have examined trust from a discursive and interactional point of view; that is, research on trust and trust issues that arise and are managed in social interaction is still in its infancy. Beginning attempts to take stock of the "discursive landscape" of trust have shown how multi-faceted this concept is. According to Candlin and Crichton (2013), for example, trust has a number of

discursive characteristics, such as being discursively constructed, situated and bound by context, continuously negotiated and a condition of social action. Schäfer (2016) adds some additional features to this list by arguing that trust is, among other things: a pragmatic/semiotic phenomenon; related to Goffman's (1967) concept of face; an aspect of the relationship; a positive social attitude; and a by-product of communication (not the main 'action' itself). Given the complexity of characterizing trust from a communicative viewpoint, Schäfer (2016, pp. 68–69) points out some of the main problems that arise when studying trust. For instance, trust may be associated with many other related phenomena such as 'believability', 'trustworthiness', 'confidence', 'reliability', 'belief', 'loyalty', 'relationship' and others. Trust is also normally not topicalized in conversation, but rather oriented to when trust is breached, weakened, broken down, etc.[1] Finally, because trust is generally not a topic *per se* in interaction, analyses of trust may be perceived as 'interpretive', deriving from an analyst's assumptions rather than in empirical observations that are grounded in what people say and do.

In this article, we review the literature that examines trust from an interactional perspective, highlighting how issues of trust are constituted and emerge through verbal and non-verbal communication. Our focus is on interactional studies, drawing from conversation analysis, CA (see Sidnell and Stivers, 2013), that prioritize speakers' sense-making practices as they unfold in sequence. Our aim for this mini-review is to identify the common threads emanating from these studies and to suggest possible avenues for interactional-focused trust research for the future. To begin, we will distinguish between two general foci: (1) Trust as an interactional principle in which it is assumed that participants will engage in shared cooperative conduct; (2) Trust as an ongoing interactional accomplishment and resource, orienting to phenomena such as the social relationship or knowledge. Finally, we discuss some possible future directions for interaction-oriented trust research.

2 Trust as an interactional principle

From this vantage point, trust is a binding feature or principle of interaction. Garfinkel (1963) argued that social actors are committed to maintaining a socially shared and expected natural attitude of daily life (see also Schutz, 1970). He showed that participants assumed a general stance of cooperativeness even when they were being 'misled'. For example, in his 'student counseling experiment', students-subjects sought advice by asking Yes/No questions to an 'experimenter-counselor' who was instructed to provide predetermined Yes/No responses to the student's questions. Although many of the experimenter-counselor's responses at first appeared unsatisfactory, confusing and incongruous, the students strove to make sense of these answers. As Heritage (1984, p. 92) concludes from Garfinkel's study, "…the subjects so managed their interpretations as to view the 'advice' they had been given as coherent, as compatible with 'given conditions' as represented by the normatively valued social structures perceived by the subject, and *as the trustworthy product of properly motivated advisors*." [italics ours]. Similarly, in his work on conversational implicatures, Grice's (1975) states that, in conversation, there is an overarching commitment to being a cooperative interactant. Thus, speakers trust that another's contribution at talk will be informative, relevant and sincere. Talk that appears to deliberately and blatantly deviate from these criteria will generally be interpreted as flouting a maxim of conversation (e.g., irony, tautologies). This would be seen as triggering an inference capturing the implicit import of the utterance, but still as adhering to the general cooperativeness principle. Maxim violations, however, such as when a speaker lies, do not presume cooperativeness and thus may severely compromise trust.[2]

Garfinkel and Grice have shown that an attitude of trust is intrinsic to cooperative interaction for, without this trust element, conversationalists would perpetually be in a state of doubt, having to question the other's reasoning and intents, which has been shown to lead to breakdowns in communication (see also Goffman, 1983; Misztal, 2001). Trust, however, is not blind but may be shaped by what Sperber et al. (2010) have termed *epistemic vigilance*, which broadly relates to the ability to question the reliability of sources of information. As Sperber et al. (2010, p. 364) have argued, "we could not be mutually trustful *unless* we were mutually vigilant."

Aspects of trust as a general principle may also be seen in other forms of social and interactional phenomena. For instance, in Goffman's (1967) writings on face and facework, a certain level of trust and commitment is needed in order for conversationalists to uphold each other's presentation of self. This may also hold for various topics in conversational analysis, such as domains of knowledge and experience, which are centrally tied to trust issues. Pomerantz (1980), for example, introduced the term *Type 1 knowables*, which refers to a speaker's biographical knowledge to which s/he has primary rights and access (see also Labov and Fanshel, 1977, on A- vs. B-events). Thus, we trust and expect that a person will know certain personal details (name, date of birth, address, 'family status', etc.), where they were last night and with whom, and so on. As Antaki and Finlay (2013) nicely sum up, trust is primarily a matter of *predictability* and *normativity*. People predict that, if they seek advice from a counselor, they will receive it in some form. Trust is also normative. Not being able to display access to your own biographical events is a deeply accountable matter. We trust that a close friend will be able to share with us their whereabouts the previous night. An inability to do so is accountable and may lead to suspicion ("why will not she tell me?") or to concern ("Is she alright?").

3 Trust as an ongoing interactional accomplishment

Interactional research has examined trust from two angles: The first is when trust is overtly thematized and the second involves trust

1 For an overview of relationship or alliance ruptures in relation to trust see Chouliara et al. (2023). For an overview of the international management of ruptures in psychotherapy, see Muntigl (2024) and Muntigl and Scarvaglieri (2023).

2 One could also mention that in speech act theory, for example, certain *felicity conditions* pertaining to speech acts, such as sincerity, may also be related to trust issues and, importantly, to the success of communicative exchanges (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

issues that only surface implicitly and not necessarily by any direct reference to trust *per se*. In the sub-sections below, we review interactional studies that have investigated trust from these different perspectives.

3.1 Explicit orientations to trust

Schäfer (2016) has pointed out that, as a rule, trust tends only to be thematized when it is at risk. Thus, speakers tend to use the term "trust" in contexts where it may be lacking, and it is perhaps not surprising to find an abundant use of trust terms in political and economic discourse—see Muntigl (1999)—but also with regard to recent COVID-19 pandemic communication (Bührig and Schopf, 2024). Edwards and Potter (2005) have argued that one productive line of research involves analyzing conceptual terms (e.g., "know," "angry") for the interactional and rhetorical work that they perform. Some research has examined the explicit use of 'trust' or trust-related terms in this fashion. Couture (2006), for instance, provides an example of how the term "trust" is used in family therapy to facilitate the step-wise entry into advice giving. The conversation centered around the son, Joe, who had been in the hospital due to self-harming behavior (cutting himself). While in the hospital, Joe had created a sort of contract in which he created a list of things that might keep him safe from harm. Since his release, however, Joe had begun to have doubts about the contract's ability to keep him out of harm's way. Due to Joe's increasing mistrust concerning the contract, the family felt that they had reached an impasse and needed to gain a more forward-moving position. During the therapy session, trust becomes thematized, and the therapist uses the term 'trust' to reinforce the notion that trust needs to be earned back in this situation and that increased trust may help Joe to then revisit his prior contract and to allay his doubts. Another paper by Imo (2016) examines how a 'second opinion' is made a topic during oncological therapy planning talk. Although the term "trust" (or "mistrust") does not always appear in these examples, introducing the topic of a second opinion may be seen as an intrinsic trust-relevant practice. Imo has shown that when the topic of second opinions arise, doctors often use 'pre-emptive' strategies with the aim of diminishing patients' distrust and of building up trust in their diagnosis and proposed therapy. Finally, Rosumek (1990) conducted a study at two clinics in Northern Germany, analyzing linguistic rituals that played an important role in promoting trust.

3.2 Implicit orientations to trust: non-verbal resources

In other studies, the discursive link to trust is much more implicit. These studies do not look for instances of "trust" or trust-related terms *per se*, but examine social contexts in which 'trust' appears to be relevant (or at risk) and try to identify practices, mostly non-verbal, in which an attitude of trust is maintained. In a study of a medical consultation involving a physician and a 12-year old boy in the company of his mother, O'Grady and Candlin (2013) use CA methods to examine how trust between the patient and the doctor is engendered and sustained. The context of trust, they argue, involves securing patient autonomy, and allowing the boy to feel confident that he will not be embarrassed or judged. This is achieved, they argue, via the doctor's continuous interactional work involving gaze direction, bodily orientation, choice of address terms, the (re)configuration of participation frameworks and the relationships between the participants. Another study by Tuncer et al. (2023) explores how trust and legitimacy are established at collocated and hybrid auction sales. They claim that trust is important during auctions because of the need to demonstrate that the bids are genuine and that the valuation and exchange of goods is trustworthy. Establishing transparency is deemed to be especially important for maintaining trust during bidding. Some of the resources used to accomplish transparency are alternating gestures, head orientations, bodily configurations and displaying bidders' changing statuses on a turn-by-turn basis.

4 Trust and relationships

As already noted, everyday conceptualizations of trust often stress its interpersonal or relational component (Dunbar, 2018), which has been shown to be especially important in medical consultations and psychotherapy sessions—for an overview of discursive studies on relationships, see Muntigl and Scarvaglieri (2023). There has been much research in patient-doctor communication, suggesting how a more caring, trusting relationship may be established and maintained. Mikesell (2013), for instance, suggests three general interactional practices by which physicians may achieve this aim: (i) using open-ended questions; (ii) eye gaze to suggest availability and an attending recipient; and (iii) paying attention to patients' verbal dysfluencies. Bührig (2009) has shown, however, that in intercultural communication, doctors are also faced with the challenge of communicatively coping with what they see as an excessive focus on trust. Frankel and Beckman (2020), on the other hand, focus their attention on the *patients'* potential contributions to help establish trust and to receive satisfying care by recommending that they take certain steps as summarized by the acronym PREP: Prepare, Rehearse, Engage, and Persist.

Within psychotherapy, trust can be viewed as a mechanism for reducing threat, enabling clients to process vulnerability, and enabling them to more accurately symbolize their trauma (Chouliara et al., 2023). Further, Gazzillo et al. (2019) have argued that client disclosure of previously avoided distressing experiences is often facilitated after the therapist has successfully passed an interpersonal challenge from the client. They claim that therapists may be presented with various forms of tests or challenges (client criticism, disagreement or praise) to gauge the degree of trust on hand and that by "passing the test" (therapist's management of disagreement, criticism, etc.), clients may feel safer and therapeutic work may be facilitated. Muntigl's (2020) study of a client undergoing client-centered therapy shows how a therapist was able to successfully navigate through a client's experience of distress. Following repeated responses of client disagreement and criticism (i.e., the interpersonal challenge or "test"), the therapist was able to topicalize the growing strains being placed on the therapeutic relationship and to use various interactional practices in concert (empathy, noticings, nodding, body positioning) to resolve impasses to emotional exploration.

5 Trust and knowledge

Another important facet of trust involves knowledge, or what Fonagy and Allison (2014) have termed *epistemic trust*. Taking inspiration from relevance theory (Wilson and Sperber, 2012), trust is referred to as "the authenticity and personal relevance of interpersonally transmitted information" (Fonagy and Allison, 2014, p. 372). We have already seen that trust in the validity of information

may play an important role in how auctions may be interactionally organized. Distrust may also be a factor in patients' aversion to taking medicines (Britten et al., 2004).

Knowledge (or epistemics) has been a key topic of conversation analytic research—see Heritage (2013)—examining not only how speakers take up epistemic stances through various conversational resources (i.e., lexico-grammatical and turn design features) on an ongoing basis, but also how these stances relate to status and territories of knowledge (Heritage, 2013)—see also the recent special issue on 'epistemic stance' (Miecznikowski and Jacquin, 2023). The concepts of epistemic stance, status and domain have been shown to be beneficial in exploring trust-related issues in conversations. Returning to the previous discussion on trust as an interactional principle, it is expected that participants are able to access their biographical knowledge, or what Pomerantz (1980) has termed *Type 1 knowables*. Persons with neurological disorders or brain injuries, however, may have difficulty demonstrating epistemic authority in this way. Persons with dementia or other memory disorders, for example, may have difficulties to remember past recent events, where they are, etc. (Jones et al., 2016). In such cases, a participant may not fully trust the other's knowledge of events, which can also lead to relationship stresses. Antaki and Finlay (2013) studied the conversational practices between persons with intellectual disabilities and support staff in a residential housing unit. They found that support staff responses seemed to often treat the prior talk of persons with intellectual disabilities as untrustworthy; that is, staff did not initially accept their conversational conversations and instead interrogated these responses over a number of turns. As Antaki and Finlay (2013, p. 33) argue, "Each episode of breakdown in trust is trivial in itself, but in each, we see the profound difficulty of whether, and how, to take it that the other person's talk is trustworthy. The person with intellectual disabilities is, as we have seen, particularly vulnerable to that trust being exhausted."

6 Discussion

Our mini review has examined the existing literature that investigates trust from a discursive, interactional perspective. From this review, we conclude that there exist two different, yet complementary, views on trust: Trust as an interactional principle and trust as a discursively accomplished phenomenon. In this first view, trust is a binding feature of social interaction, in which breaches may result in deep communicative problems. Participants depend on each other to be cooperative and to assume that there is a shared understanding regarding our goals and what we mean in general. In the second view, trust is oriented to as a relationship quality, something that can be strengthened, weakened or even broken using specific forms of interactional resources and practices. For example, asking for a second opinion may imply that someone's competence or information cannot be fully trusted. Relationally, mistrust may lead someone to not feel safe and to refrain from disclosing important personal (sometimes distressing) experiences. Sometimes these views intersect with each other, as for example when speakers assume that another is not (or cannot be due to memory or intellectual impairments) a fully cooperative participant. This orientation of mistrust may also manifest itself interactionally, however, when for example recipients respond to uncooperative persons by not accepting the import of what they say (Antaki and Finlay, 2013).

Interactional studies on trust, however, are still in their infancy. We contend that one of the biggest challenges is to show how trust is implicitly realized through non-verbal means. For example, although gaze, body position, participation frameworks, etc. can certainly be related to trust issues, a number of important questions are still in need of answers, such as how do verbal and non-verbal resources work in concert to display trust and, further, do certain body positions and/or facial expressions lead to inferences of (mis)trust?—see, however, recent research that focuses on trust and non-verbal communication in virtual/conversational agents (Rheu et al., 2021; Wang and Ruiz, 2021). There is also the question of how trust can be shown to be a relevant issue for the participants involved? One possibility is the identification of *next-turn proof procedures* (Sacks et al., 1974, pp. 728–9), to show that speakers are in fact orienting to what is going on as trust-related; that is, can it be shown via the interactional details of the 'next speaker's' response that there is an orientation to trust or mistrust? Finally, we propose that more research target contexts in which 'trust' is a major concern, such as in conversations involving 'vulnerable' persons (e.g., patients, persons with memory disorders, persons suffering trauma and migrants). The research project in which all the authors are currently involved, funded by grants from the FWO (Belgium) and the DFG (Germany), examines how trust is created, maintained and placed at risk in interpreter-mediated psychotherapy involving migrants. This kind of research aims to shed more light on how breaches of trust are interactionally organized and, importantly, how trust can be restored through a variety of (non-)verbal practices.

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