

Chapter 2

Two Theoretical Approaches to Trust; Their Implications for the Resolution of Intergroup Conflict

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My purpose is a theoretical and analytic explication of the problem of trust and distrust in the situation of interpersonal or intergroup conflict. I will not refer to any concrete conflict, but rather draw a conceptual map applicable to a variety of conflicts. The main focus will be the emergence of trust and distrust in the interpersonal and intergroup relations. But then we shall narrow down the focus to the question how trust can be rebuilt when distrust is pervasive between individuals or groups, taking for granted that distrust is a core definitional quality of an interpersonal or intergroup conflict.

There are two theoretical approaches concerning the emergence or decay of trust. First, we may speak of the trust or distrust rooted in history, i.e., building trust and distrust incrementally from below. Both are perceived as path dependent, emerging in the long cumulative process made of beneficial or harmful experiences in mutual relationships. History of peaceful and fruitful cooperation or coexistence begets trust whereas history of mutual violence and wars results in distrust. In the same way history of mutual support and coalitions against outside enemies produces trust, whereas history of breached treaties, disloyalty, and treason leads to distrust (Sztompka 1999).

The second approach focuses on the trust and distrust as rooted in a wider structural context, i.e., building trust and distrust purposefully from above, by shaping the environment of actions, individual and collective. Both trust and distrust are perceived as emerging due to the imposition of, respectively, secure or insecure environment for the mutual relationships. Order and predictability by means of a rule of law and consistent policies is conducive to trust, whereas anarchy, *anomie*, and arbitrariness of law and law enforcement begets distrust. In other words public accountability of action is crucial. Russell Hardin observes: “Much of our ability to trust others on ordinary matters of modest scope depends on having institutions in place that block especially destructive implications of

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untrustworthiness” (Hardin 2002, 109; See also: Hardin 2004). Equally important is the efficient and transparent administration which results in trust, whereas weak, inefficient, secretive bureaucracy easily leads to pervasive distrust (Kramer and Cook 2004). Another important aspect of the environment of action is the “civilized public sphere”: “the social conditions and mechanisms that make actors, institutions and organizations act and perform in a civilized manner in a public sphere” (Papakostas 2012, viii). Such context induces trust, whereas decay of everyday civility and basic moral bonds of loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity, and sympathy are the assured road to pervasive distrust. Finally more intangible factors matter as well. I have in mind the aesthetic frame of everyday life, cleanliness, neatness, orderly arrangements, light, and color which breed optimism and trust, whereas dirt, decay, disorder, grayness, and darkness stimulate gloom and distrust.

I will treat both approaches as complementary rather than alternative or competing, drawing implications for the problem from both of them. Now we have to narrow our focus by distinguishing four modalities of trust building, or trust decay, i.e., four types of processes dependent on the different starting points. First, it may happen that trust or distrust already existing is simply enhanced, extended, deepened (e.g., trust in a long-time friend, distrust in a long-standing enemy). This is quite common, because of the well-known mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1996, 183–204). If we trust somebody, and particularly if we have been trusting for a long time, we tend to interpret his/her actions as signals of trustworthiness, up to a moment when the evidence of untrustworthiness becomes overwhelming. The reverse is true of distrust. If somebody is distrusted, and particularly when distrust is pervasive for a long time, his/her actions are easily interpreted as a proof of untrustworthiness, e.g., cynical schemes to lower the vigilance and disarm the enemy, unless overwhelming evidence points to the contrary with strong proofs of authentic good intentions (Hardin 2004). Second, we sometimes reach trust or distrust ad hoc in an encounter with a stranger (e.g., due to the impulse of “first impressions”). Third, we may attempt to reverse the vector of trust or distrust. Trust is a fragile resource. When breached or abused, it easily collapses. The more commitment to the relationship and stronger the trust, the more rapid and dramatic is the reaction to the evidence of untrustworthiness (e.g., the loss of trust in the disloyal spouse). On the other hand initial distrust is much more resistant to change, obtains certain inertia. The most demanding case is breaking the vicious cycle of deepening distrust and beginning the slow construction of trust. There is a certain asymmetry: “Distrust is harder to unlearn when conditions change to justify trust, than is trust when conditions change to justify distrust” (Hardin 2002, 107). Therefore, the situation of interpersonal or intergroup conflict, by definition implying distrust, presents the most difficult challenge. Regaining trust in the enemy sounds like a *contradictio in adiecto*. To probe if such a situation is necessarily hopeless, we must make certain conceptual clarifications.

Trust and distrust appear in the context of uncertainty about the future actions of others: individuals or groups. Both concepts are symmetrical: “Trust and distrust are functionally equivalent in that they tell us how to act when we do not know for sure the other’s motives and intentions and being wrong could have undesirable

consequences” (Luhmann 1979, 71). Trust is an optimistic bet: those actions of the other will be beneficial, meet our expectations. One may call it a “bridge over the sea of uncertainty.” Distrust is a pessimistic bet: those actions of the other will be harmful, disappoint our expectations. It is a prediction of “being harassed, threatened, harmed, subjugated, persecuted, accused, mistreated, wronged, tormented, disparaged, or vilified by the other” (Kramer 2004, 141). Distrust is a “wall against the threat of uncertainty.”

Taking action based on hypothetical belief, like in all bets, implies risk. The risk of trusting is that I will not get what I wanted, or that I will not regain a property or value I have entrusted. The risk of distrust is that I will pay unnecessary costs of surveillance and protection, that by avoidance or separation from the other I will forgo the opportunities of valuable relation, that my preemptive action will provoke retaliation, which would not have happened otherwise, and hence will start a vicious cycle of growing animosities.

The beliefs about the target of distrust may be arranged along a certain scale. The other may be conceived as an inhuman monster, which demands extermination. Such definition easily leads to genocide, because it releases the fundamental moral constraint, which people normally experience when harming other people (Bauman 1989). A bit less viciously, the other may be defined as the enemy threatening us, who therefore must be defeated (harmed, weakened, disarmed). A definition of the other as merely alien, different in ways hard to accept, but not directly threatening our well-being implies the need for separation or isolation. The results are various measures of segregation, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, erecting ghettos. If other is treated as a stranger, he/she is grudgingly tolerated, under the condition of respecting our values, ways of life, customs, and Gods. This is sometimes referred to as a negative tolerance. “Live and let live” is the motto of the policy of multiculturalism. The most beneficial case is treating the other as a neighbor. This implies the acceptance and use of difference as enriching our own resources of information, knowledge, skills, and competences. Sometimes we speak of positive tolerance.

The way out of deep conflict is the gradual deconstruction of the image of the other which may move through consecutive steps: from monster to mere enemy, from enemy to alien, from alien to stranger—and eventually to neighbor. But whether this process is feasible depends on the strength of beliefs about the other. The dynamics of weakening conflict is hard to start if the distrust is paranoid, insulated against any arguments. Such bad expectations about the other become particularly resistant when supported by religion, ideology, or primordial nationalism. The extreme case has been described by social psychologists as a “group-think” phenomenon (Janis 1982). “Trust often begins and ends at the social category or group boundary” (Kramer 2004, 138). In the intergroup conflict the beliefs about others become rooted at each side in emotions of group solidarity, loyalty, sharing with “us” and rejecting “them”. This easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when rejected, others naturally respond with hostility, which seems to confirm the wisdom of initial rejection. “People reveal more altruism and reciprocity toward members of their own group even when the group is purely categorical and thus devoid of social interaction, than toward members of another

group” (Foddy and Yamagishi 2009, 37). There is always a bonus of extra trust toward “we”, and the handicap of stronger distrust toward “them”.

To discuss the ways and measures to eradicate distrust it is necessary to see how distrust emerges, what is its genealogy? Distrust, like trust, rests on three “legs”. First is the rational calculus, low estimation of trustworthiness of the other party. It takes into account six factors. First, the reputation; history of earlier deeds, experiences in earlier contacts with the partner. Here distrust is predicated upon a specific history of interaction with the other (Rotter 1980). The asymmetry mentioned earlier reappears here: impeccable reputation over a long period of time is needed to obtain trust, whereas single dishonesty, disloyalty, or any hostile gesture produce distrust. Trust is a “fragile” resource. Second, we may take into account the credentials; second-hand warnings, direct or indirect evidence by trusted referees, symbols of threatening status. Third, the appearance matters, i.e., external signs of untrustworthiness or hostile intentions. Fourth, we may observe the actual untrustworthy or hostile performance, actions taken by the distrusted other. Fifth, we may refer to “encapsulated interest” of the other (Hardin 2002, 3–9), by putting ourselves in the role of the enemy and empathically imagining the vested interest of the partner in cheating or harming oneself. Six, we may examine the environment of conflict with emphasis on the lack of accountability, when untrustworthiness cannot be easily punished and trust enforced.

The second “leg” on which distrust rests is purely psychological, beyond the purview of sociology. This is pervasive suspiciousness, a personality trait engendered by ineffective early socialization as well as later bad experiences in public life, in extreme cases leading to paranoid distrust.

The crucially important third “leg” is cultural (Sztompka 1999, 119–138), the widespread distrust culture (captured in common parlance by metaphors such as bad social climate, hostile atmosphere, low morale). More precisely by distrust culture I mean shared, constraining, seemingly “external” social fact (Durkheim 1964 [1895]). It consists of a common belief about the other articulated in stereotypes, prejudices, myths, rumors, gossips, xenophobia and expressed in hostile actions. The emergence of distrust culture is likely if any of the four conditions are obtained (and of course even more likely, if all of them are to be found together). First condition is the emotion or mood of existential insecurity produced by the *anomie* (normative chaos), anarchy, inefficiency of public institutions, unpredictability of the future. Second is the instability, undermining of routines, rapid, traumatogenic change brought about by the conflict (Alexander et al. 2004). Third conducive factor is the secrecy and nontransparency of the actions and intentions of the other party (Hardin 2004). Fourth is the perception of the futility of measures taken against the untrustworthy partner, visible lack of accountability and responsibility for hostile actions, inefficiency of law enforcement and retaliatory measures.

If distrust is rooted in rational evidence (even if subjectively exaggerated or biased) and spreading in society as a culture of suspicion, the changing of such a condition, weakening distrust, and rebuilding trust is very hard. The possible strategies and tactics may take two directions: become focused on the relationship of mutual distrust, or target on the structural context of conflict. And in both cases

the attempts to disarm the conflict may be taken by the parties themselves or invoke the third parties as mediators.

For analytic purposes let us look at the situation of conflict first from the point of view of a party which distrusts, and then from the point of view of a distrusted party. A party which distrusts can resort to two strategies and the implementation of each depends on the construal of the distrusted. The negative strategy of violent prevention or armed defense aims at raising the costs of untrustworthy conduct. If it is targeted on the other defined as enemy, it is manifested in coercion, enforcing trustworthiness by power, sanctions, deterrence, stronger vigilance and surveillance, preemptive strikes. This is not always feasible and on many occasions self-defeating because it only feeds the vicious spiral of hostility, producing even more distrust. The strategy differs if the other is perceived not as the enemy but merely alien. The measures taken toward untrustworthy aliens come down to the avoidance of contacts, segregation, defensive nonparticipation, breaking of relations. This is not always possible and particularly hard in the conditions of common settlement, close neighborhood, long cohabitation, kinship ties, division of labor. Russell Hardin refers to such conditions as “trapped relationships” (Hardin 2002, 92).

Another option are the positive strategies: instead of the defense against untrustworthiness, signals of tentative trust. They may take the form of small scale, piecemeal, incremental testing of untrustworthiness by revocable decisions (without “burning bridges”), e.g., a temporary truce, cooperation in some limited domain, creating small islands of cooperation and mutual recognition. Such gestures of trust are of course less risky for a stronger party, which has more resources for damage control if moves of trusting prove futile.

Another strategy is assuming the rule of reciprocity and relying on the evocative trust, i.e., the obligation to become trustworthy if one receives unconditional, one-sided trust from a partner (Sztompka 1999, 28). In the conditions of conflict, this requires more risky, dramatic, conciliatory, gestures manifestly raising the vulnerability of the benevolent party. This may consist, for example, in resigning of some protections, releasing prisoners, partly disarming itself, opening the isolating boundaries, and stopping segregation. Of course again only the stronger party can afford the risk of cynical abusing the opportunity by the opposite party in order to get the upper hand and gain advantage in the conflict.

The above strategies are open to the party, which distrusts the other. On the other hand, a party which is distrusted may attempt to modify the beliefs of the partner by providing some evidence of competence, or honesty, or sympathy, or even altruism by means of unilateral moves and signs of good will. Proving his/her trustworthiness; “a person can do something out of ordinary that would not otherwise be expected if he/she were untrustworthy” (Luhmann 1979, 42). Such gestures demonstrating trustworthiness may initiate a sustainable process of mutual trust and cooperation. It is known as a “graduated reciprocation in tension reduction” (GRIT strategy) (Osgood 1962). Of course if the distrust is mutual, as is most often the case, each party is at the same time distrusting and distrusted, and thus all strategies may be relevant and used together, in the best circumstances as mutually complementary.

Both parties to conflict may also resort to the third party with some legitimacy, authority, or power recognized by both (international organizations, institutions of regional integration, hegemonic powers, famous charismatic leaders). They may be helpful in two ways: through mediation and through reshaping the context of conflict. Mediation may take various directions. First, it may aim at clarifying some mutual misperceptions and stereotypes by fact-oriented arguments, certifying at least potential trustworthiness of both parties. Second, it may attempt to demonstrate some common interest of both parties in stopping hostilities and emphasize the raised costs of escalation. Here the mediation changes the perception of incentives. Third, it may promote some higher level values or superordinate goals over the value differences, and the clash of purposes. The mediator may argue for religious ecumenism, or regional solidarity, or basic humanity. The fourth strategy is the fragmentation of the contested issues, showing that the conflict is not overall and promoting cooperation in some, selected areas whose risk is miniscule because incentives to cheat are small.

The third party may also make attempts to reshape the context of conflict, the environment in which the conflict develops. Again there are several possible measures. First is raising accountability and responsibility of both parties before the third party, embracing them by a common regime of rules and rule enforcement. Second, diluting the rigid distinction of “we” and “them” by facilitating bridging ties, flows, and mobility through the boundaries of groups. Third, providing opportunities for attractive common ventures, e.g., profitable trade, sport events and competitions, art festivals, regional folk markets. Fourth, guaranteeing the stability of the situation by demonstrating consistency and permanency of long-range policies adopted by the third party vis-à-vis parties in conflict. Fifth, revitalizing, ordering, and aesthetically improving the environment of everyday life to raise existential security and overcome the emotions of gloom and hopelessness. And sixth, as a sort of meta-principle, all the policies and decisions described above must be made as transparent as possible.

All this requires a lot of ingenuity, commitment, and good will of both parties to the conflict, as well as the intervening third parties. But I wish to end with a ray of hope. “There is evidence that the barriers to trust, though formidable are not insurmountable. The knot of distrust, if not untied completely, can at least be loosened” (Kramer 2004, 150). Optimism in this regard, as optimism in general, may have a self-fulfilling impact mobilizing the search for trust-building measures and in effect attenuating the conflict. The alternative is hopelessness and despair.

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