

Negotiating trust: the unseen mechanisms that make trust (im)possible



trust, 50x60cm, acrylic on canvas

Trust is a term widely associated with the notions of reliability, truth, and safety – in other words, with the conditions necessary for us to engage our resources in relationships, activities, ventures, development plans, or other means of internalisation of what we perceive and experience as “the world”. What is interesting to explore, though, is the criteria for evaluating reliability, truth, and safety, and how trust relates to the formation and maintenance of the multidimensional phenomenon termed identity.

In our quest for answers to these intricate questions, we need to zoom into identity as a negotiation of meanings and consider the triggers, drives, dynamics, and outcomes of such negotiation. Although identity is, in reality, the quintessential expression of our uniqueness, it is constantly challenged in our encounters and interactions with the outside world and therefore, potentially affected by the environment’s perception of what we are or should be like. The reason for the discrepancy between what we are and what we are seen as lies in the very way in which each system (person, community, society) internalises its environment and makes sense of it, relying on its own pre-existing meanings and organisation – or even lack of organisation. Therefore, systems with greater meaning affinity and convergence are bound to have less divergent claims on each other, thus facilitating each other’s development on their actual identity axis. On the other hand, systems lacking in shared meanings have the following options: a. disentangle themselves from each other completely, b. construct a shared acceptance of their overall incompatibility and co-exist only to an extent and in a way that does not compromise their integrity and truth, and c. suspend their disbelief in order to participate in a shared scheme that appears to be beneficial in some respect (e.g. financially), an option which reflects negatively on their continuity and coherence of identity and jeopardises their meanings and personal organisation. It should be noted here that, as identity is a multidimensional phenomenon involving everything that makes part of the “self”,

meaning affinities – or divergences – are also multidimensional and all-encompassing. Thereby, the aforementioned suspension of disbelief on one level induces internal incongruity and incomprehensibility and instigates a fragmentation of identity that legitimises the alienation from our own selves. Identity fragmentation and distortion can also be the result of trauma, abuse, or extortion but in the context of this article we are exclusively looking into mutually agreed arrangements.

In the light of these findings, trust appears to be a twofold question, addressing both the environment's respect for who we are and our own reliability vis-a-vis the preservation of consonance and meaningfulness within our system (self-trust). In both cases, safety emanates from a multilevel meaning sharing: in the first case, it is the compatibility of two systems or between a system and its environment that makes the one safe for the other and ratifies co-existence; in the latter, meaning sharing is self-referential and describes the continuity and consistency of an organism across its various levels and functions. In either case, trust is a state that cannot be faked or built; rather, it flows from inside out as the result of a recognition, a reminiscence of unity, and an acknowledgement of likeness.

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