

Interview Guido Möllering

Interviewer: Professor Möllering, welcome at TrustTalk. You are a director and Chair of Management at the Reinhard Mohn Institute at the Witten-Herdecke University in Witten, in Germany. And you are also an editor-in-chief of Journal of Trust Research.

Guido Möllering: Yes, thank you. Hello, Mr. De Wit. I've been studying trust for almost 25 years now, and so it's a big pleasure to be on TrustTalk.

Interviewer: You're welcome. Nice to have you. As the start of this interview, I would like to use a well known story, that of the Eagle and the Lion. An eagle flies over a lion's cave, the lion welcoming the eagle, offers him some fresh food. And the eagle wants to be friends with the lion to get this food more often and offers the lion an alliance. The lion then said: "My friend, it sounds good to have an alliance with a powerful bird like you but how can I trust someone who has the privilege of flying away from the situation any time?" To me, this sounds like a quintessential problem with trust. Everyone feels what it means, and the concept gained increasing popularity across the social sciences, but it remains elusive. It's many facets and implications obscuring a clear overall vision of its essence. What's your view?

Guido Möllering: Oh, that's a very nice fable, a very nice little story. And it reminds me of a chapter titled by Diego Gambetta "Can We Trust Trust"? That was the conclusion of his famous edited book. And if the concept is so elusive and so hard to define, is it actually really useful for research? And I think that has been an important question for all of us struggling with the definition. It has even been subject to a debate with Williamson, like should we even use the word trust in research because we're not really sure what it means? So I think that's a very important discussion and it's still ongoing. By now, nobody has kind of caught the eagle and chained the eagle to the ground so that it can't escape anymore. I think sometimes while I myself tried to pin down trust, sometimes I think it's also helpful to be clear what trust is not and to kind of clearly distinguish it from other things. For example, that trust is not calculation or the same as a calculated risk taking, that it is not simple, routine or rule following or just a matter of habit. It's not a soft form of control. It's something beyond that. And sometimes I think the lack of clarity has to do with the fact that we confound trust with other things. And just to clarify how trust is related to these other things, we get a clearer those still kind of obscure picture of what trust really is. And also, it's important to be clear when trust actually

matters and under which circumstances it may be matters less. For example, if the preconditions like vulnerability and uncertainty are not very present, then trust is also not so relevant. So we shouldn't bring in trust as an important factor in situations when other mechanisms can serve us just as well. So I think it remains elusive. And that's why sometimes it's even more important to ask what trust is not than to just try to have the perfect definition.

Interviewer: Yeah, well, actually that's of course, the role we try to take in the TrustTalk podcast to find out by interviewing experts like yourself, in what situations you can use trust and what it then means. And in your academic work, you, of course, trust, like you said, has been your main theme. And in a book, I think it's from 2006, it's called "Trust, Reason, Routine, Reflexivity" you write that trust manifests itself between the three elements from the title of the book, reason, routine and reflexivity and all three I need it, but neither can explain trust alone. And all three need to be complemented by a conceptualization of what you called the leap of faith required for all trust. I think that needs some clarification.

Guido Möllering: Yes, thank you. And of course, I cannot summarize the whole book or even all my thinking that occurred also after the book. But the leap of faith element is very important. And I picked that up from Georg Simmel, the German sociologist who more than 100 years ago wrote that trust means to believe in someone without being able to really say what it is you believe. And that trust is somewhere between knowledge and ignorance, and that was one important thought that I had already picked up before the book and then for the book, I tried to kind of sort out and map the landscape of thinking about trust. And one approach to trust is very calculative, is a rational choice approach. And if you look at all that literature, which I summarize as the routine part of trust literature, it actually explains a lot. But at the end of the day, calculations don't explain trust fully. Then we have the more sociological approaches. Let's think of Garfinkel and others who explain trust mainly as a routine following, as something that is embedded in roles that we just fulfill, but also that doesn't really lead us all the way, because even with all the rules and roles and routines that we have, there always remains the possibility of being disappointed. And we somehow have to be able to live with that, or even if trust is a matter of learning or reflexivity and where we gradually find out how much and how we can trust people, it's still that learning process that is ongoing. And that is always, if you like, a little bit dangerous and risky and you don't really know. So, human beings in their relationships and interactions, they need to be able to live with this uncertainty and vulnerability that they

cannot completely get rid of. And that's why they need to believe in their own expectations and in the goodwill of the others. That's the faith element, the leap of faith and faith, meaning you are sure about something without really being able to prove it. But there are also other ideas, like from Hegel, the philosopher, this idea of suspension which I use, or sublation, which philosophers call it, just this idea that you can if you have an uncertainty, you don't need to resolve it always. You can kind of maintain it, but also deal with it or just bracketing and the construction of an "as if"-attitude. I mean, these are all the things that for me are the core of trust. So there always remains a gap. And dealing with that gap is really what trust is about. And so I think that's why the leap of faith is not the same as trust, but all trust includes such a leap of faith. I don't know if that's very clear. I know it's very abstract, but it's very abstract. And it's probably the hardest thing to also operationalize in research. But it is the essence of trust in my mind.

Interviewer: Yeah. Another angle to trust is presented in your article "Process Views on Trusting and Crises", in the Handbook of Advances in Trust from 2003, Advances in Trust Research in 2013, and you call there for an emphasis on trusting rather than trust. Would that be a radical shift in trust research?

Guido Möllering: I'm not sure if it is a radical shift as such, also because I'm not the first one to point this out, but it is a very important reminder what is involved in trust. So if we call it trusting, if we refer to trust as a verb or a, you know, a noun that that comes from a verb, then we highlight the fact that trustors and trustees, they are active. They are not just passive to each other or to the possibility of trusting. They create the possibility of trusting others, being trusted by others, and by using the "ing"-form, we highlight that trust is something we have to work on, like Giddens wrote, and that also develops over time. So this "ing" also suggests some kind of time dynamics with which is the other aspect that I really wanted to emphasize in that chapter, that we can't look at trust very sensibly in static terms. There's always a history before and there is a future after. And the quality of trust in a relationship also changes over time, which is one of the reasons why we need to continuously work on trust and do something about it, reinforce it confirm it in relationships. And it is really important that we always view trust as a matter of something that happens in a relationship with actions and reactions, mutual expectations, but also like mutual dreams almost, about what the relationship can fulfill.

Interviewer: Your article we just talked about is also very topical in suggesting we should further analyse changes in trusting. Let me quote your article here: "first and most broadly, any loss of trust during a crisis calls for a deeper analysis of changes in trusting. How did people produce trust before and why are they no longer able to do it to the same extent as before?". I think the corona crisis where we are currently in, is a perfect example that trust is not a static, but rather a continuous and dynamic process. First, we fear the disease and trust any vaccine will bring us back to normalcy. And once we have the vaccines, more than one, trust seems to shift when we are confronted with the risks of side effects. Would you agree with that?

Guido Möllering: Yes.

Interviewer: With the current situation, we are in

Guido Möllering: thank you very much. I mean, the situation at the moment is, of course, like a lab setting, like a real experiment on trust and trusting. And, let me just refer to the statement that you quoted, because what I'm trying to say there is that trust is not just about trustworthiness, but also about trustfulness. So trustworthiness concerns the trustee, the person who wants to be trusted. And of course, if we're talking about vaccines, the producers of those vaccines, we ask ourselves how trustworthy they are. And we might consider for a number of reasons, some of these producers more trustworthy than others. And of course, that is going to shape our willingness to be vulnerable to them and to try the vaccine. But there's also our own side, our trustfulness as trustors. And sometimes when trust is not very strong, it is also because the people are not prepared to trust because of their own uncertainty and their own fear, let's call it, which does not stem directly from the other side, right, my own trustfulness does not just depend on how trustful I think you are, but the trustworthy you are, but really, whether I feel that I can cope with any damage that might occur, whether I have a social network that encourages me to try something or not. So we need to look at both sides of the relationship and the trustworthiness of one side is needed, but also the willingness to trust the trustfulness of the other. And finally, with the vaccines, I would like to again, maybe to clarify something a little bit. It's very important that when we talk about trust in vaccines or let's say in machines, in non-human entities, it's important to clarify whether that's actually meaningful, because the vaccine as such is not an actor that is benevolent to me personally or not, you know, or my car, when I get my current morning, I don't really have a trust relationship

with my car in the sense that the car decides whether it starts or not, depending on how it feels towards me that morning, you know, and also the vaccine the liquid that is injected into my arm, it's not what I trust. I trust the person injecting it and I trust the person ordering it to be injected and I trust the person developing it and selling it for those doctors to actually use. And so we are really with vaccines and the like talking about system trust here, where we are looking at various responsibilities as a network of actors almost, that is involved in making sure that the product is safe or not safe. And so I would encourage us to really look at the web of relationships that we have here. And finally, again, when we use the word trust in this context, it is clear already by using this word that we don't have perfect certainty. It's not perfectly safe, but we have a choice between making the type one or type two error, type one being I'm not trusting a vaccine that is actually safe or I'm trusting a vaccine that is actually not safe. And we have to decide which of these two errors is worse. And in trust research, generally, we come to the conclusion that it is better to try trust and find out that it wasn't deserved and then to stop the relationship, then to not even try and risk trusting, mistrusting something that is actually trustworthy. And I think I personally would recommend with the vaccines that after they have gone through all kinds of control processes and have been supported by authorities, then from a patient or citizens point of view, I think it's worth trying something that might turn out not to be as safe then to not try it at all. I know this seems harsh because it's a matter of life and death, but what I really wanted to illustrate is that a trust can go wrong, but distrust can also be wrong. And it is a very important question which kind of error we risk and which one we don't.

If we talk about pharmaceuticals and pharma and stuff, you also refer to an interesting study on trust as a process, the relationship between trust and identity. They analyse the relationships between pharmaceutical companies and HIV/AIDS community organizations in Canada. What does that study illustrate?

Guido Möllering: Oh, yes. Thank you for referring to the study. It's really one of my favourite qualitative research projects on trust that I'm aware of and that I know of. And it has actually helped me a lot in my own research journey, if you like. So you're referring to a study by Steve McGuire, Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy that was published in 2001 in *Organization Studies*. And yes, they analysed over a period of time the relationship between the HIV/AIDS community in Canada and pharmaceutical companies. And they noticed that at the beginning there were very adverse relationships. They really defined each other's in terms like the evil side, you

know, these activists were very dangerous from the point of view of the pharmaceutical companies. The activists themselves saw the pharmaceutical companies as the enemies. And so initially, their exchanges were not very productive at all, as you can imagine. And they really didn't get anywhere. And it took a lot of time and a few actors that were willing to open up. And then at some point they started to see each other in more cooperative terms. They saw themselves as McGuire called it as "advocates collaborating with compassionate and consultative partners", which really means that the pharmaceutical companies learned that they could actually get a lot of useful input and support from the from the community and in return, the community also saw that the pharmaceutical companies were actually trying to help them, and they learned that they could benefit from each other and in the process and that they were on the same side of, if you like, and in that process, they redefined their own identities and this enabled trust, but it also shows that in all our trust relationships, our own identities are involved, because if we say we trust somebody that really says something about us and not just about them. And so in this case, the pharmaceutical companies, HIV/AIDS community, they needed a lot of time to really find out their identities, but did so successfully to see each other as partners. And so, yes, building trust might require to redefine or at least somehow readjust our own identities.

Interviewer: Interesting. And I want to talk with you about a "lock-in-scenario", also called "The Trust Trap", where organizations are initiated, maintained and ultimately terminated. Organizations are biased towards favouring continuity over change, especially when relationships have been working well for a while and trust between the partners has become institutionalized. They may just find themselves in a position where change is no longer possible when problems arise. So where what role does trust play in this "lock-in-scenarios"?

Guido Möllering: Yeah. This is a very interesting discussion that Jörg Sydow and I have had over a number of years and then finally managed or we finally put our thoughts together and also published a chapter on this and presented our ideas at some conferences. What, well, this partly comes also from the fact that Jörg Sydow is an expert on path dependence and path creation. And we noticed that in the trust literature and also in empirical reality of trust, we see these reinforcing cycles that trust is self reinforcing, but also distrust by the way, of course, there's the are these spirals of trust or spirals of distrust. And in a way, you might think that a spiral of trust is desirable because trust gets stronger and stronger and stronger, isn't that nice?

Well, yes, it is. But it can also get too much, if you like. This is what we describe in the chapter, that there might be a point where the trust is so strong that you are no longer able to leave the relationship or even just readjust the relationship and see if it is still doing what it's supposed to be doing. And it's interesting how sometimes also in the business world, relationships are very successful and cooperative and productive for a long time. We have examples like Apple and Qualcomm and Microsoft and Intel, both were very productive, long term collaborations that went well. But at some point, but too late, they got sour and they had big problems with each other. And that is, we would say, probably because they realized a little bit too late that their relationships had become somewhat locked-in and it was hard to get out of them anymore and they needed each other and there were big problems. So generally speaking, the "trust trap" is a term describing situations where the self reinforcing processes have become too strong and where trust continues, even though it may not be very productive anymore. And that is indeed strange that this can happen. But I think we all have, even in our private lives, examples of people that we feel we have to continue trusting, even though somehow it's maybe not so right anymore. And of course, the overall discussion here is whether we can recognize in a relationship earlier on that we shouldn't just build trust stronger and stronger, but how can we maintain this kind of check this monitor on the relationship and make sure we don't just continue because we've always done things together?

Interviewer: Yeah. Given the time restraints, we have to I still have one final question for you, and that's maybe it's a little bit of a surprise. I think I like surprises at the end. We see trust always as a good thing, right? Something to strive for and maintain. You just gave an example where too much trust can also end up in what you then call the "lock-in-scenario". But there have been numerous studies showing that trust is not always desirable. I think one of the examples just mentioned. For many, however, this may come as a complete surprise because trust is something good, something you want to strive for, something you want to maintain. So how can it be not good?

Guido Möllering: Yes, yeah, I know. And I think but I think it is very, very clear how we can also see trust in a in a slightly bleaker picture. First of all, I already mentioned, of course, trust can go wrong. And so in a way, misplaced trust when you find out that with hindsight you shouldn't have trusted. It's of course, an undesirable trust, but only in hindsight. And this is the real question, whether just because you might be disappointed, you shouldn't trust. And here I'm

clearly on the side that it is not good to err on caution. You should try trust, but you have to be aware that it can still go wrong. The second thing is that there is this kind of unwanted trust. We can ask ourselves if that is really trust, but sometimes trust relationships are not completely voluntary and somebody forces you to be in a trust relationship with them. I mean, the most drastic example is maybe in criminal circles in the Mafia when somebody says, you know, Luigi, I trust you and then Luigi knows that this kind of trust is maybe not the one they wanted, because if they happen to disappoint, it is very dangerous. So there are these kind of unwanted trust relationships that you also cannot easily get out of and they are trust really becomes a burden. And finally, there may be externalities to trust. So some people who trust each other because of that can maybe do very bad things together. Criminals, just all kinds of externalities where a group of people who are really trusting each other do damage to others outside of the group. And here, of course, we might say if they trusted each other less, maybe they wouldn't do so much damage. So here we talk about externalities. But at the end of the day, what it where it leaves us is that trust per se is not good. It matters what you do with it. And nevertheless, if you want to cooperate with somebody, trying trust is worth it. And in that sense, trust remains a good idea. But we have to take a closer look at what is actually used for and what it long the longer term effects turn out to be.

Interviewer: Prof Möllering, it is very good to talk with someone who obviously has spent a bit of his professional life researching trust. Thank you very much for being our guest at TrustTalk. And I wish you good luck with your further research on trust, because, as you said, there is no end to it yet.

Guido Möllering: Thank you very much and thank you for giving me the opportunity to explain a few things that are important to me. And I wish you much success also with the podcast and look forward to hearing other episodes as well. Thank you.