

## TrustTalk interview Paul C. Bauer

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**Voice-Over:** Welcome to TrustTalk. Our guest today is Paul Bauer. He is a research associate at the Mannheim Center for European Social Research. In his research, he is particularly interested in the methodological side of trust research. In some of his work, he investigates whether different people interpret surveys on trust in similar ways. In other work, he uses causal research designs to examine the effects of experiences such as victimization or unemployment, on trust. We talk about whether researchers agree on how to define trust, how to measure trust, and the potential drawbacks of different ways of measuring trust and about behaviourally exhibited trust, which refers to trust that is shown through actions and behaviours rather than just words or promises. Your host today, Severin de Wit.

**Podcast Host:** Paul, Welcome to TrustTalk. I would like to start our interview with a rather emotionally worded quote from Stephen Covey, known from Franklin Covey in his book "The Speed of Trust": "There is one thing that is common to every individual, relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy and civilization throughout the world. One thing which, if removed, will destroy the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love. And that one thing is trust". Paul, that seems hard to disagree with wouldn't you say?

**Paul Bauer:** yes. So, Severin, first, thanks a lot for this invitation to this podcast. I have to admit that actually I haven't read the book. I think it's a very influential book in management science. But obviously, as you say, it's hard to disagree because I also view trust as an ingredient to successful organizations and governments. But I would also say that on the other hand, like such broad statements that they reflect the rather simplistic binary view of trust, so we either have trust or we haven't. Me as a political scientist and sociologist usually operate with a bit more complex understanding of trust. So people might have different levels of trust, citizens could have different levels of trust in their government and then we would probably also add a question on the numbers how many citizens to have a low level of trust. I would rather say that

such a strong statement is made by Stephen Covey could motivate us to do research on how we would define trust, but also search for cases where, despite having lost trust, governments and organizations continue to work. So that would be an interesting starting point, actually.

**Podcast Host:** The immediate reason for us to talk today is that you wrote your doctoral thesis about trust called "Three Essays on the Concept of Trust and its Foundations". That was 2015. So despite decades of research, an answer to the question, can we measure individual trust, remains surprisingly unsatisfying. Why is that?

**Paul Bauer:** I think the reason why it's unsatisfying is that we simply learned over time that the questions we use are to some extent problematic. So, for instance, the most popular survey question that we use to measure social trust goes along the lines: "Do you think that most people can be trusted or that you can't be careful enough in dealing with people?" And this question contains concepts such as most people, And by now we know that people might interpret this question differently. This is a measurement problem, and we find such measurement problems across different trust survey questions. That's why I would say that it's kind of unsatisfying, still to some extent.

**Podcast Host:** Our main subject of this interview is measurement of trust. But before we go into that, I want to go back to your dissertation where you mentioned and we have seen it first-hand here in the podcast, that there is no universal definition of trust. And in your thesis, you wrote and I'm quoting, "Without such an agreement, research will merely produce endless discussions on how we conceptualize rather than new empirical insights". So it seems that over the recent years, science has achieved more common ground. Would you agree with that?

**Paul Bauer:** I think that's a difficult question. So different researchers such as me certainly have tried to provide some synthesis of various trust definitions and to come up with a more refined definition of trust. And that's actually an exercise that started years ago. But right now, it's hard for me to tell whether researchers that currently work on trust, whether they are really converging towards one definition, so I would rather say that this is an interesting research question, and we could we could actually do a survey among trust researchers. What kind of definition of trust they are currently using, and then basically see whether we have achieved common ground. And another way to study this would be to look at research articles and

basically scan the hundreds of studies that we have now and see how many of them have used similar definitions. But for me, it's hard to answer actually.

**Podcast Host:** Well, at least for the podcast TrustTalk, we try to shed some light on this by interviewing people that spent a great deal of their either professional or personal life finding out and describing what the definition of trust is. So I mentioned measurement of trust. There are plenty of surveys, reports and studies measuring trust. Can you describe some of the different methods that have been used to measure trust in research studies and discuss the strengths and the limitations of each approach?

**Paul Bauer:** Yes. So I would argue that most people agree that trust is a judgment so I can judge you to be a trustworthy person, meaning that you will fulfil certain expectations that I might have and then based on such a judgment, I could act. So, for instance, I could do an interview with you because I trust you, and in sociology and political science, the most common method to measure trust is to ask people for their judgments in surveys. So we could ask them: "Do you trust your family? Do you trust your neighbours?" and the infamous generalized social trust question that I just mentioned is, for instance, "do you think that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?". That's one way, basically directly asking for these judgments. And besides that, we can also observe the behaviour and then conclude that certain behaviours we observe should be based on a high level of trust. So, for instance, I could observe a friend lending money to another person, and then I would assume that she trusts this other person because I've observed this behaviour and there's actually a large literature that attempts to measure what trust researchers call "behaviourally exhibited trust", in other words, behaviour that is based on trust. And we often call this area experimental research, because usually in this area, participants, for instance, students are invited to what is called an experimental lab in a university. And then we basically observe their behavior in these experimental labs. And should I go a bit more into detail here?

**Podcast Host:** Yeah, well, maybe you can answer the question: what are the strengths and the limitations of what you call the survey and the behavioural measurement of trust?

**Paul Bauer:** So in the behavioural tradition, just to give an example, one of the most common forms is the "classic trust game". So we invite students to an experimental lab at a university,

then we divide these students into groups that trustors and the trustees, and then the trustors they give them a small amount of money, for instance, \$10, and then they can decide to send a part of that money to the trustee. And then this amount of money is multiplied, and then the trustee can return some amount of that money. And in the behavioral tradition, we would equate the amount of money sent in this trust game with the level of trust. And this basically contrasts with simply asking people for their the level of trust.

**Podcast Host:** And, sorry to interrupt you, Paul, but for me to understand, so if in that attempt to measure trust, the trustor delivers \$10 to one person in the trustee group, you would define it as a complete trust of that particular person by the trustor because he delivers the whole amount to the trustee?

**Paul Bauer:** Yes, that's basically it. So people are paired, there's always a pair of two people. You are the trustor, you send the \$10, so the maximum, and then I would say that you have the highest level of trust, basically. And this is a behavioural measure. Broadly the limitation and strengths, I think when we look at survey measures, one debate that we always have is are the survey measures behaviourally relevant? So if you answer that, you have a lot of trust in your family or in strangers, then the question would still be, would we also see that in your behaviour towards your family or your strangers? Measuring a high level of trust in a survey doesn't necessarily mean that people also behave in that way. And what regards behavioural measurement and the standard is basically these experiments that we do with students, one criticism or one limitation is whether the behaviour we observe in these lab game experiments really generalizes to other behaviours, meaning that if I observe you sending \$10 in my experimental lab, does that also mean that you exhibit trusting behaviour in other situations or not? So to what extent is that behaviour reflected in others' behaviours?

**Podcast Host:** Let's focus a bit on the organizations that measure trust like Edelman, Pew, Glocalities, and large consultancy firms like Deloitte, KPMG, PwC, and EY. And what struck me is that it seems that those results, these measurements, I should say, are not always very much aligned. What causes this non-alignment?

**Paul Bauer:** There might be different reasons for non-alignment. So first and I have to say that now without knowing the exact measures they're using, but first I assume that they probably

use slightly different survey questions to measure trust. And if you formulate a question that's slightly different than another one, this could already cause differences in the measurement values that you obtain with that question. And so that might be one reason. Then another reason is surely that the data is collected at different time points. So we might run a survey with a group of people and then if we would ask them four weeks later, they would probably provide us with different values of trust. And I assume that these different organisations, they measure trust at different time points. Do you trust most people in your response process, basically, you start considering different things, you might think of someone else this week and the next week you think of another group of people and this strongly affects your response, knowing it might lead to this variation. And then surely a third difference will also be that they rely on different samples, meaning that in their survey they have different people that give different answers. And there's also differences in how they collect the data. And so there's certain standards in this data collection, so usually we try to collect random samples out of populations, but then it's very likely that some of them use telephone surveys, some use online surveys, and some rely on in-person interviews and these different measurement modes, they also cause differences in trust measurement values.

**Podcast Host:** That brings me to my next question. In preparation of this interview, I came across the OECD guidelines on measuring trust. So one would expect that if there are guidelines by an authoritative organization like the OECD that researchers and these consultancies would comply with those guidelines so that we don't get different results by using different methods, right?

**Paul Bauer:** Absolutely. So for me, it's hard to judge, so I actually don't know to what extent other researchers accept these guidelines as a benchmark. Knowing this document, I think they are providing an extremely helpful overview of trust, definitions, and measurement. So it's a really helpful document. Naturally, it's from the year 2017, and trust research is constantly evolving, so I think at some point they should probably update it with more recent knowledge. And I think at least from my perspective, maybe to some extent, they haven't always incorporated kind of the newest insights we have within trust research. So that's my individual perspective, but it's still an extremely helpful document.

**Podcast Host:** As an expert in measuring trust, do you believe that the concept of scientifically quantifying trust, like we just discussed, goes against the idea that trust is an emotional and a subjective feeling that's hard to fix in numbers or percentages?

**Paul Bauer:** I would disagree., so I would say that even if we think that trust is an emotional and subjective feeling, I think we should try to quantify it. And in the future, we will probably have better ways of doing so. So to give you an example of my own research, we are now collecting audio responses, open-ended audio responses where we basically can hear people's voices, and this might provide us with the possibility in the future also to try to measure whether their response was more or less emotional when they answer these trustworthy questions.

**Podcast Host:** So if you do that, you also closely work together with psychologists?

**Paul Bauer:** Yeah. So we have some. Yeah, at least we talk to them. Yeah.

**Podcast Host:** So earlier we talked about the definition of trust. So how are our definitions of trust related to measurements of trust?

**Paul Bauer:** So I would say that empirical measurement of trust is often detached from definitions. So often authors, at least in my field, sociology and political science, they use some standard definition of social trust, for instance, and then they use some standard measurement of social trust, but this measurement, for instance, the survey question, often does not closely mirror the definition of trust they've used. And then there's also quite a few examples where authors of empirical studies say simply define trust as what they are measuring and the empirical study, so they basically don't come up with the real definition of trust, but just use a measure of trust. In some of our own work, we basically tried to find a better fit. So for instance, in one study we defined trust as a subjective probability, that's actually an understanding that I like a lot, and then we developed survey scales that mirror this definition. So we explicitly asked the respondents for a probability statement.

**Podcast Host:** What would that question be?

**Paul Bauer:** So that question could look like: "Imagine you lose your purse in the street. What do you think is the probability that this purse will be returned to you?" And then if you provide a questions like this, you also have to introduce the concept of probability a little bit, because it's kind of also a hard concept for respondents. So you would tell respondents a zero probability means that this won't happen and a 100% chance means that you will get back your purse. This is basically measuring a subjective probability.

**Podcast Host:** So how can measurement affect our findings on the causes and the consequences of trust?

**Paul Bauer:** So to give you a concrete example of my own research, so in 2015, I published a study on the effect of victimization on social trust, on generalized social trust, and generalized social trust was measured with the standard question: "Do you think that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?", so that's the standard scale and then victimization was measured with different questions. For instance, one question was, "Have you been threatened during the last year?". And in this empirical study, I didn't find an effect of victimization on social trust, although I would have expected it. And I think that is related to the measure of trust I used. So if I get victimized by someone, it should strongly decrease my trust in that person or in persons that belong to this category. But I will probably still give the same answer to the most people trust question

**Podcast Host:** OK, let me see whether I understand what you're saying. If I'm victimized by a big, tall guy, right in the last year or so, would that mean that I have, as of now, less trust in big, tall guys?

**Paul Bauer:** Yeah, I would assume that it might affect your trust. If you meet a person that looks similar to that big tall guy, then you would probably trust them less because of that experience. But this change in trust, we wouldn't see it in our generalized social trust measures.

**Podcast Host:** Paul, I like to ask you the question that I posed to almost all my guests in this podcast, and that is, what are the challenges of future generation researchers in measuring trust? And would you give some thoughts about the role of artificial intelligence in future methods?

**Paul Bauer:** I think one of the challenges may be this is like a more general answer, so if you're a researcher that now goes into this area is that there's this massive body of knowledge, so you have many, many books and many empirical studies written in different disciplines and also many different measures of trust. So I think one challenge is simply to get an overview of all this knowledge, and this is actually where AI could help us to some extent if it helps us to summarize all that knowledge. And I think we are seeing first examples of that where AI provides short summaries of empirical papers. And then I think another area where it really helps us, is that we can now use different methods. So for instance, in our own research, we now collect audio data, where people then record the answer and then AI, or machine learning algorithms, they basically allow us to transcribe this data automatically into text, and then we can also analyse this text automatically using AI. The great advantage here is that we can analyse much greater amounts of data in a much shorter time and gain insights through that. So I think this is kind of a big advantage that's provided through AI and it also tackles the challenge that we have much more data available and we can optimize the analysis of the data to some extent.

**Podcast Host:** Paul, thank you very much for your insights into the measurements of trust. I wish you good luck and success in your academic career, I should say, your further academic career, and thanks for being available at TrustTalk.

**Paul Bauer:** Thank you, Severin and thank you for organizing these podcasts. So I listened to some other podcasts and found them very interesting.

**Podcast Host:** Thank you. Thank you very much.

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