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Trustworthiness versus Trust: An Important Distinction with Significant Ethical Implications for Social Work

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Abstract

Trust is increasingly viewed as a key aspect of societal functioning—from micro to meta. This article explores the constructs of trust versus trustworthiness, and their significance for social work. It critically considers these constructs in general and, then, more specifically in social work practice and the profession as a whole. The dominant paradigm and discourse prioritize trust as the primary aim, with vulnerability being a parallel expectation. That is, trustworthiness is secondary—or not considered, at all. In this dominant framing paradigm, those being expected to trust must make themselves vulnerable.

Through use of both individual and universal stories, and grounded in the scholarship on this topic, the author examines the ethical implications of having trust as a dominant goal. The epistemic and pragmatic implications of this goal are considered, especially within ubiquitous power differentials. This dominant paradigm is problematic in relation to social work priorities, such as social justice and human rights. In the dominant frame, building trust is a common metaphor. Informed by critical reflection and social work ethics, the

author proposes a new narrative with a framing metaphor of cultivating trustworthiness. This paradigm shift has important implications for social work practice and the profession as a whole..

"You're just going to have to trust me."

The university provost delivered this directive to me toward the end of a meeting in which I had shared significant, ongoing issues. These concerns included a pattern of systemic, institutional racism and encompassed matters related to basic psychological and physical safety. Colleagues and I had been pursuing these concerns for some time. As a full, tenured professor who had been at the university for almost two decades, I believed I had an ethical responsibility to use my privileged status to advocate and contribute. As a white person, I believed I had the moral obligation to use my positionality to challenge white supremacy. Further, as a long-time social worker, I believed I had a particular ethical imperative to pursue justice and human rights—including in my own profession and workplace.

Yet, at every level—including my meeting with the provost—University administration continued to ignore, downplay, and sweep under the rug these concerns. In some instances, colleagues and I were bullied, gaslit, and punished. A general atmosphere of distrust permeated the University. It was a case study of "cordial hypocrisy," which Solomon and Flores (2003) coined as "the strong tendency of people in organizations…to pretend there is trust when there is none, to be polite in the name of harmony, when cynicism and distrust are active poisons eating away at the very existence of the organization" (p. 4).

To the provost's assertion, "trust me," I responded, "I have learned that trustworthiness is a much more pertinent goal than trust. For reasonable trust to occur, trustworthiness has to be established." I elaborated briefly on what I meant. I offered, "Let's check back in a few weeks to see how trustworthiness is developing." Then, I thanked her for the meeting. I reiterated my commitment to addressing these concerns, as well as my hope for and

support of her leadership in doing so. After a bit of silence, we exchanged perfunctory comments to close the meeting.

"As of today, your employment with Spalding University has officially ended."

A few weeks after the "trust me" meeting, this sentence began the brief letter signed by the university president and provost. The letter came by certified mail to my home on a Friday afternoon. Two colleagues and I had met that very morning with the Faculty Senate regarding the concerns I'd discussed with the provost. I had no warning; no process was followed; no reason was given for my termination. My firing precipitated an investigation by the American Association of University Professors. AAUP's (2017) report thoroughly documents the background, context, and rationale for their censure of the University. (At this writing, the University remains censured.)

I have not spoken with the provost since our "trust me" meeting. But, if I do—trust me! —I will remind her of our meeting. I will clarify that, indubitably, trustworthiness has not been established.

Overview: Re-storying Trustworthiness as Paramount

In this article, I thread this particular "trust me" story throughout to illustrate salient, universal points. I invite you to think about one of your stories in which the distinction between trust and trustworthiness is a central theme. For this exercise, identify a work-related scenario; it may pertain to clients, causes, colleagues, or other contexts. Like mine, it may pertain to your organization and its leadership. I tell my "trust me" story because we all have these stories, both individually and collectively.

By telling my story and encouraging your story, I hope to contribute to creating a larger narrative wherein trustworthiness is recognized as a primary consideration, rather than ancillary to trust. As such, this article draws upon narrative and storytelling (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2019; Burack-Weiss et al., 2017) as empowering methodologies that are particularly relevant in efforts to challenge harmful dominant paradigms. The article begins with a

broad-based exploration of the dominant story or paradigm that presents trust as paramount and trustworthiness as ancillary or invisible. Then, the article focuses on how this discussion applies to social work, as an ethical consideration, and proposes a re-story.

I purport that a dominant emphasis on trust, which diminishes or dismisses attention to trustworthiness, is not innocuous; rather, it is significantly problematic. Especially through a social work lens, this emphasis on trust can be foolhardy, dangerous, and harmful. Thus, this topic is an important ethical consideration that merits more explicit critique and consistent attention. Toward that purpose, I propose that instead of *building trust* as the dominant frame, we *re-story cultivating trustworthiness* as the primary aim.

"Building Trust": A Just Critique of This Dominant Framing

"Trust" is a topic of growing interest in myriad contexts. Ma et al. (2019) provide a helpful metanalysis to "enable scholars who have not followed the trust literature to identify issues and trends" (p. 2). These authors remark upon the burgeoning studies about trust as indication of its expanding importance. For instance, amongst other indicators, they point out that the number of published studies of trust within teams, alone, swelled from less than 10 prior to 2000 to over 100 by 2015.

The importance of this topic is reinforced by emerging findings about the impact of this construct. Increasingly, trust is linked with an array of positive associations and outcomes highly desirable for functioning and well-being (e.g., Simon, 2020a). For instance, in organizations, trust is associated with employee satisfaction, engagement, investment, and performance (e.g., Coughlan, 2021; Feltman, 2021; Lencioni, 2002). It is linked with greater organizational commitment, identification, and proactive behavior (e.g., Ma et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2006; Schaubroeck et al., 2013). These linkages contribute to higher morale, lower turnover, cooperative teamwork, and greater productivity (e.g., Coughlan, 2021; Covey & Merrill, 2018). Trust affects social and personal dynamics—from group process, to interpersonal

negotiations, familial/personal interactions, and other human exchanges (e.g., Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Ma et al., 2019; Simon, 2020a). A high level of trust is characterized by positive cognitions, such as hope, and high satisfaction in relationships (e.g., Allen, 2022; Brown, 2018; Covey & Merrill, 2018).

Consistently, the literature defines trust as "confidence in another party and a willingness to be vulnerable to the party" (Ma et al., 2019, p. 3). Coughlan (2021) asserts that trust is a "relatively complex psychological state that arises in relationships characterized by dependence and risk" (p. 1). Notably, "vulnerability" is persistently and explicitly identified as an integral aspect of trust (e.g., Brown, 2018; Feltman, 2021; Ma et al, 2019).

The preponderance of study and attention to this phenomenon positions "trust" as the primary focus (e.g., Allen, 2022; Simon, 2020a). Attention to the construct of "trustworthiness" is notable in its absence—or, if present, typically treated as ancillary. In 1995, Mayer and colleagues explicated a now classic model for trustworthiness in which they identified three components of trustworthiness as benevolence, ability, and integrity. In their model, benevolence is generally defined as desiring good for others; ability is construed as competence; and integrity is explicated as adherence to principles, such as truthfulness and dependability. This model is often cited when trustworthiness is mentioned. However, trustworthiness is typically treated as a secondary consideration to the main topic, trust (e.g., O'Neill, 2013; Potter, 2020).

The dominant framing focuses on trust as the primary aim. Oftentimes, the metaphor of "building trust" is used to convey that trust is the ultimate construction. This framing sets up an expectation of vulnerability in order to achieve this superordinate aim.

What does this discussion about trust vs. trustworthiness have to do with social work practice and the social work profession? More specifically, how is this topic an ethical concern? Consider what social workers do. One would be hard-pressed to name any social work role, responsibility, or relationship that does not involve trust. Social work involves working with clients in a micro role, facilitating communication in mezzo intersections,

advocating for causes in macro contexts, and navigating the integrated aspects required by our social work mission of pursuing social justice and human well-being. In all these facets, trust vs. trustworthiness is a crucial consideration for our profession (e.g., Healy, 2017).

One of the defining features of a profession is its willingness to establish ethical standards to guide practitioners' conduct. Ethical standards are created to address ethical issues in practice and to provide guidelines for determining what is ethically acceptable or unacceptable. As Reamer (2022) asserts, "To practice competently, contemporary professionals must have a firm grasp of pertinent issues related to ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making. This knowledge enhances social workers' ability to protect clients and fulfill social work's critically important, values-based mission" (p. 117). In this context, if the pervasive, ultimate aim is posed as "building trust," then an ethical imperative is to clarify what that means and critically consider its ramifications.

When Trust is the Aim

My "trust me" story illustrates a common misunderstanding about trust. It crystallizes a prevalent phenomenon in organizations—and, actually, in all levels of relationships, personal and professional. Trust is touted as a desired goal and indicator of a healthy work environment and relationship. Often, implicitly and subtly, the message is: If you do not trust, you are not a team player. You are not a good colleague. You are not a community-builder. You are not loyal to the organization or relationship. If you do not trust, *you* are the problem.

As encapsulated in my story, trust is often used as a bludgeon to subdue dissent and a muzzle to silence critique. In a case of irony, in my meeting with the provost, she shared that a favorite resource was *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. I acknowledged I had not read the book, but that my colleague, Laura, had given me a copy, because she used it in her organizational leadership consultations. Notably, Laura, who is Latina, was an assistant professor and one of my social work colleagues most harmed in the

toxic dynamics pervasive at the university. Laura was also a courageous voice in our joint advocacy efforts to address the toxic culture. The provost was aware of this dynamic.

In further irony, perusing the book later, I learned that Lencioni (2002) lists Dysfunction 1 as *Absence of Trust*. Lencioni declares, "Trust is at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Unfortunately, trust is used—and mis-used—so often that it has lost some of its impact." He elaborates, "...trust is the confidence...that...intentions are good and that there is no reason to be protective or careful..." (p 195). Lencioni provides strategies to use in building trust and advises that vulnerability is key in these efforts. Notably, Lencioni does not discuss trustworthiness.

Similarly, as another popular example, in *The Thin Book of Trust*, Felt-man (2021) defines trust as "choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions" (p. 9). Whilst Feltman briefly men-tions trustworthiness, it is—again—consistently treated as a secondary topic. Trust is paramount. Notably, again, the theme of vulnerability is per-sistently pronounced as the necessary element for trust to occur.

Stephen Covey and Rebecca Merrill's (2018) bestseller, *The Speed of Trust—The One Thing that Changes Everything* serves as a quintessential ex-ample of this dominant narrative. The authors declare a "crisis of trust" (p. 10). Emphasizing the ubiquity and urgency of this crisis, the authors assert that "trust...undergirds and affects the quality of every relationship, every communication, every work project, every business venture, every effort...It changes the quality of every moment and alters...every future moment of our lives—both personally and professionally" (pp. 1-2). Yet, a content anal-ysis reveals that the construct *trustworthiness* is not given even cursory con-sideration. In this 374-page tome with titles and headings liberally used on every page, trustworthiness does not merit mention. Furthermore, the term *trustworthiness* does not appear in a detailed index of terms.

Interestingly, vulnerability does not appear in this book. Unlike more prominent definitions that presume vulnerability, Covey and Merrill (2018) define "trust" as "confidence" and the opposite, "distrust" as "suspicion." (p. 5). This inattention to both trustworthiness and vulnerability may be

attributable to the book's primary intended audience of managerial leaders (i.e., high-level power positions). As I discuss below, trust—with presumed vulnerability and inattention to power differentials—is typically presented in terms of subordinates trusting. Remarkably, in summarizing the benefits of responding to this crisis of trust, the book concludes "leaders everywhere" are recognizing that trust is "the ultimate currency" (p. 343).

Social work seems to largely follow this dominant narrative. For instance, classical studies on trust—such as Luhmann (1979) and Seligman (1997), which inform the profession—place trust as primary. At this writing, a keyword search of several databases—including this journal—revealed scant attention to trustworthiness. As one prominent example, Brene Brown is perhaps the most widely-known contemporary social work voice, on topics such as leadership and complementary human dynamics. Her influence reaches a broad range of sectors and a growing global audience. In her best-selling book, *Dare to Lead*, Brown (2018) dedicates an entire section to "Braving Trust." Brown briefly mentions trustworthiness. However, Brown's dominant focus is on trust. As an important indicator of its lack of attention, the term *trustworthiness* does not even merit mention in the book's detailed index. Like other dominant sources, Brown emphasizes repeatedly that trust requires vulnerability.

Healy (2017) offers a significant exception in the social work discourse. In a pivotal essay, explicitly asserting a crisis of trust, she issues a clarion call for social work to become a trustworthy profession. Emphasizing that social work is a relationship-based profession grounded in particular values and ethics, Healy discusses how the profession must prioritize trustworthiness. She calls for reasserting professional purpose, committing to professional excellence, and exercising courage in advocacy and addressing abuses of power.

When Trustworthiness is the Aim

Amidst a broader culture and a professional context of a "crisis of trust," in the university's climate of "cordial hypocrisy," I was experiencing the parody of "trust as currency." Fortunately for me, though less so for the provost, I had not yet read the dominant advice that frames trust as the presumed aim and vulnerability as the necessary starting point. However, fortuitously, I *had* listened to the venerable Onora O'Neill. A British Baroness and member of the House of Lords, O'Neill is a renowned philosopher who focuses on international justice and human rights. O'Neill's (2013) TEDx talk "What We Don't Understand about Trust" is captivating and paradigm-shifting. In my "trust me" meeting with the provost, in a superficially collegial way, we shared resources. When I clarified the importance of trustworthiness, I recommended the provost consider O'Neill's work.

O'Neill (2013) succinctly and effectively makes the case that the aim "have more trust" is a "stupid aim." She asserts that putting trust before trustworthiness is consequentially problematic. "Trust is the response. Trustworthiness is what we have to judge," she clarifies. Thus, the aim should be trustworthiness. Thus, the task becomes—rather than building more trust—to ensure evidence of trustworthiness. O'Neill concludes, "We need to think much less about trust...much more about being trustworthy, and how you give people adequate, useful, and simple evidence that you're trustworthy."

As noted earlier, Mayer and colleagues (1995) identified benevolence, ability, and integrity as elements of trustworthiness. Yet, consistently in research and practice, trustworthiness is treated as secondary to trust, which focuses on vulnerability as a core requirement. Allen (2022) cogently presents psychotherapy as one of myriad examples of disciplines that ignore trustworthiness—with serious consequences. Allen writes that *trust* is generally considered essential for effective therapeutic relationships. Allen highlights that the emphasis—rooted in the power differential—is typically placed on how clients need to trust the therapist; the client is problematic when they do not trust. He observes, "But trusting makes no sense unless

the trusted person is trustworthy, and trustworthiness is almost entirely neglected in the psychotherapy literature" (p. xxv). After decades in the field, Allen purports that "trustworthiness [should be] the overarching aim of...psychotherapy" (p. 49). Similar to O'Neill's (2013) corrective, Allen asserts, "With trustworthiness, depending on others is a solution, not a problem"; the aim is to "trust well (in proportion to trustworthiness) and to distrust well (in proportion to untrustworthiness)" (p. 151).

Likewise, Potter (2002) develops this paradigm-shift. In particular, she emphasizes that the constructs of power, equity, and justice must be critically considered. A philosopher and feminist theorist, Potter contends that relationships of trust should take into account power differentials. She explains how the traditional prioritization of trust—which typically ignores attention to power—fosters the privileged exploiting those in vulnerable social positions. She writes, "So, while it is not one's moral responsibility to trust others, it is one's responsibility to cultivate proper trust" (p. 12). Thus, she maintains that a just, moral, and ethical approach must place trustworthiness as primary. In this shift, using a virtue theory lens, Potter lays out a framework for focusing on trustworthiness as necessary for creating moral character, healthy relationships, equitable cultures, and, ultimately, a just world. As Potter summarized, (Personal Communication, May 9, 2022), "Most of the literature on trust does not ask the question: Why should I trust you? What makes you worthy of my trust?"

Significantly leading in this discourse, *The Routledge Handbook of Trust and Philosophy* (Simon, 2020a) offers progress in exploring those questions posed by Potter and develops the paradigm-shift. The comprehensive volume contains 31 entries written from global perspectives and multi-disciplinary lenses ranging from sociology, law, economics, nanotechnology, and others. In introducing the volume, Simon (2020b) explicitly asserts the need to correct the dominant narrative that places trust as paramount and trustworthiness as secondary. Then, in the first chapter, "Questioning Trust," O'Neill (2020) articulates her thesis described above: Trust is a stupid—and potentially dangerous—emphasis; trustworthiness is the more important aim. O'Neill concludes, "Rather than inflating and expanding formal

systems for securing compliance and accountability yet further, it may be more effective to build and foster cultures that support trustworthiness and capacities to judge trustworthiness" (p. 26).

This theme is further explicitly developed in the *Handbook's* next chapter, "Trust and Trustworthiness," in which Scheman (2020) emphasizes the crucial points that trust and trustworthiness occur in contexts of and are impacted by power differentials. Given these important considerations, oftentimes, distrust may be reasonable and wise. Scheman concludes that decisions regarding trustworthiness and trust must take into account positionalities in relation to diversity and power differentials.

Various other entries underscore this paradigm shift. Here are some examples particularly pertinent for social work. In their entry, Nickel and Frank (2020) explicitly counter the paternalistic approach of medicine as demanding trust of the physician and instead emphasize signaling trustworthiness as imperative professionalism. Likewise, in "Trust and Food Biotechnology," Meijboom (2020) frames trustworthiness as practical and strategic, as well as moral and ethical. He concludes the main focus is not on how to change consumers so they will trust, but "what conditions the trustee has to fulfill to be worthy of such trust" (p. 386).

In other entries, Alfano and Huijts (2020) provide a macro lens in "Trust in Institutions and Governance." These authors articulate the concept of rich global trustworthiness; that is, a diverse expanse of stakeholders must have a meaningful voice in decisions; furthermore, responsiveness to power differentials—e.g., dependency, vulnerability—is essential. They succinctly conclude, "So, while trust may often be a good thing, it needs to be earned" (p. 268). Taking a systemic-mezzo lens, Potter (2020) emphasizes the important intersectional impact of the personal experiences and contextual considerations—e.g., systemic oppression, justice, reparations, and so forth—on interpersonal trust and trustworthiness. Then, Clement (2020), through a micro-lens, considers everyday interactions and the evolution of trust developmentally. He cautions that the trust hormone, serotonin, tends to assign trustworthiness to those perceived as similar. Such biases require intentional critique and epistemic responsibility.

Finally, two companion entries offer a meta-lens perspective particularly crucial for social work. A meta-lens engages, "global social aspects that both overarch and interact with macro, mezzo, and micro practice…promoting the expansive worldview necessary for a response to relevant practice realities" (Grise-Owens et al., 2014, p. 47). In his chapter, Medina (2020) writes, "Epistemic injustices are committed when individuals or groups are wronged as knowers; that is, when they are mistreated in their status, capacity and participation in meaning-making and knowledge-producing practices" (p. 68). Medina develops the crucial thesis that people are excluded, marginalized, and mistreated based on trust, distrust, and trustworthiness—and, critically, who has the power to discern or demand these.

Likewise, Frost-Arnold (2020) underscores that trust and distrust are shaped by prejudices and systemic oppressions, which foster epistemic injustice and violence. She asserts that individuals and institutions have epistemic responsibilities for developing competence in being trustworthy and signaling that trustworthiness—particularly in relations and situations with power differentials. This competence involves a host of skills and steps at all levels. For instance, Frost-Arnold proposes that educational institutions have the responsibility to "restructure curricular priorities and provide resources to teachers to help them unlearn their ignorance and develop the skills to signal [trustworthiness] effectively with diverse groups of students" (p. 73).

In summary, these considerations lead to better questions pertaining to trust-trustworthiness and trust: Whose accounts are believed, trusted, trustworthy? Whose knowing is privileged, trusted, trustworthy? Who has the power to demand trust? Who is expected to become vulnerable? How is trustworthiness engendered and earned? These considerations of trust and trustworthiness have comprehensive philosophical and pragmatic implications for the practice of social work. These questions must guide all our efforts toward becoming trustworthy.

Social Work Ethics and Trustworthiness

Explicitly consider this proposed paradigm shift toward trustworthiness as the central aim in the context of social work ethics. Marson and McKinney (2019) explain that social work codes of ethics (COEs) are integral to the profession. COEs serve to distinguish a professional identify. They explicate core values, guide professional behavior, and protect the social worker and social service recipients from potentially unethical behaviors of social workers. Given these parameters, an emphasis on trustworthiness is exceptionally congruent with social work ethics.

The International Federation of Social Workers' (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014) definition of social work encapsulates core ethical principles. Consider this definition in relation to the above discussion proposing the paradigm-shift of trustworthiness as the aim—rather than trust assumed or demanded. Core social work principles include empowerment, liberation, social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, respect for diversities, and wellbeing. Trustworthiness is essential for these phenomena to occur, and, iteratively, fosters growth of them. In stark contrast, promoting trust as an expectation and vulnerability as a requirement usually stymies them and, too often, exacerbates their opposites—i.e., disempowerment, injustice, and so forth. That is, a trust emphasis typically (albeit sometimes subtly) ignores, and often exploits, power differentials. In contrast, social work seeks to eradicate unjust inequity. In these endeavors, vulnerability should not be viewed as unquestionably necessary, but rather as potentially dangerous, particularly for persons in historically disenfranchised groups.

Furthermore, the key elements of trustworthiness explicitly align with the fundamental emphases of the profession of social work. That is, benevolence, competence, and integrity are crucial social work values. In a particularly compelling overlap, integrity is typically defined as *being trustworthy*. For instance, in explicating the core value of integrity, the United States National Association of Social Workers (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021) *Code of Ethics* expresses the guiding principle for this value as

"Social workers behave in a *trustworthy* [emphasis added] manner." (p. 6). Similarly, the NASW *COE* explicitly identifies competence as a core value (p. 6). Benevolence—defined as desiring good for others—is an overarching mission of social work (e.g. social justice, liberation, well-being). This mission is further illuminated in complementary core values, such as service, the value of human relationships, dignity and worth of the person, and importance of human relationships (e.g., IFSW, 2014; NASW, 2021).

Hence, social work is well positioned to take a leading role in promoting ethical attention to trustworthiness (Healy, 2017). And, I purport that—given our mission—the profession has an ethical responsibility to do so. This role and responsibility apply both within and external to the profession.

ReFraming: Setting A Solid Foundation Before Putting on the Roof

For much of the world, for social work specifically, and certainly the populations and causes that social work predominantly serves: Focusing on trust is—to quote Baroness O'Neill—a "stupid aim." Furthermore, especially in power differential relationships, expecting vulnerability without the establishment of trustworthiness is problematic. Critical literature and social workers' practice wisdom amply support (albeit, often implicitly) this observation.

As the above discussion explicated, distrust may be a reasonable and wise course. Kendall (2020) cogently crystallizes this dynamic in *Hood Feminism—Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot*. Kendall relates how her lived experiences taught her to "distrust." She explains, "Being skeptical of those who promise they care but do nothing to help those who are marginalized is a *life skill* [emphasis added] that can serve you well when your identity makes you a target" (p. xiii).

To summarize: Distrust is a life skill, especially for those who are marginalized and targeted. Building trust is a "stupid aim." Trusting is not a moral responsibility; instead, cultivating trustworthiness is an ethical responsibility. Given these considerations: What is the epistemic and

pragmatic role and responsibility in trust-trustworthiness? As social workers, is it ethical to presuppose trust and require vulnerability before trustworthiness is established? I contend the answer is "No." Instead, social work needs to re-story trustworthiness.

I propose an initial reframe of the dominant framework that presents trust as the foundation and vulnerability as the starting point. Using a building metaphor of a home construction site, I suggest that trustworthiness—comprised of integrity, competence, and benevolence—is the solid foundation that must be laid first. Then, building on that metaphor, power is the connective energy—i.e., electrical wiring and the plumbing—that makes the house functional. In this metaphor, vulnerability is the walls, doors, and windows, because vulnerability requires both openness and boundaries. Vulnerability is reasonable and advisable only when connected with some foundation of trustworthiness and energy of shared power. Otherwise, this vulnerability creates—at minimum—unproductive, dysfunctional dynamics. And, in toxic cultures/scenarios, this vulnerability contributes to unsafe and sometimes dangerous situations.

Finally, as a capstone rather than starting point, trust is the finished aspect that keeps out the elements that can harm and diminish the structure (i.e., relationship, organization). But, if we build by starting with the roof, it is doomed to fail. The structure is simply not going to function in the long-term. Actually, without a foundation, the roof is dangerous; it will collapse on itself. Anyone seeking its shelter will be crushed beneath it. Without wiring, plumbing, walls, doors, and windows, the roof becomes useless. It may be decorative. Even more problematic, it may be used as a cover up for a lack of substance and structure. It can be a decorative dome that makes dysfunction seem to magically disappear, whilst those left under the heavy weight are suffocated.

Ethical Implications: Re-Righting the Stories to Center and Cultivate Trustworthiness

"I'm going to have to show you that I am trustworthy."

Imagine how differently my story would be, if the provost made that assertion and activated it. Reflect on your story I asked you to imagine as we began this conversation. Imagine how differently your story would be if trustworthiness were the aim, rather than trust being the demand. Consider how differently countless stories would be written if the components of trustworthiness were presumed to be central and essential—rather than trust as the dominant aim.

When trust is the presumed priority, unethical and incompetent leaders and other persons with disproportionate power can use this assumption to bully, shame, control, punish, gaslight, and manipulate. In my story, the provost commanded, "trust me." This scenario is common. In these scenarios, we—the ones being commanded—often feel the burden of trust. We acquiesce and feel stressful cognitive dissonance from the unquestioned, implicit expectations: Good colleagues, team members, people trust. Respectful employees trust their leaders. If I do not trust, I am the problem in this equation. I need to make myself vulnerable in order for trust to be built. Emphatically, the consequences of fulfilling these expectations are not innocuous; they are consequential. Cultures of cordial hypocrisy are propagated, which breeds dangerous toxicity. In these contexts, too often, people are punished if they do not adhere to the cordial hypocrisy that requires vulnerability before competence, integrity, and benevolence.

In contrast, trustworthiness as the starting point keeps the onus where it belongs: Integrity, competence, and benevolence of those pursuing trust. In these scenarios, the burden is the proof of trustworthiness. Thus, the expectations change: Good colleagues, team members, leaders, people engender trustworthiness. Wise people critically assess trust-worthiness and

operate according to the evidence and insights. Trustworthiness is cultivated, rather than trust commanded. Trust is earned through proven trustworthiness, not expected through demanded vulnerability. Leadership and other aspects of power and privilege inherently include a responsibility for competence in cultivating and signaling trustworthiness.

I began this piece with my "trust me" story. I invited you to think of your similar story as you read this article. Now, I invite further consideration of how our relationships, communities, organizations, other systems—as well as our individual selves—might be affected by changing how we frame this dynamic. What if, instead of a framework that aims for "building trust," we re-story trustworthiness?

Changing frameworks and paradigms requires attention to the language used in the narratives. As such, metaphors matter. Metaphor is a way to use language to understand, experience, or express one kind of thing in terms of another. In their now-classic text, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) articulate how metaphors permeate our daily life (e.g., time is money; argument is war; love is blind, and so forth). These linguists emphasize that metaphors are particularly influential in describing emerging concepts. Metaphors do not merely describe, they *frame and* shape our understanding of concepts. Thus, a paradigm-shift in our understanding requires critical intentionality about the metaphors used.

As I go deeper in considering this reframe, I wonder about revising the "building metaphor" altogether. Instead, I'm considering metaphors such as "cultivating trustworthiness." Whilst perhaps initially useful in describing the phenomenon, *building* as a metaphor connotes a linear construction, finishing a product. In contrast, *cultivating* evokes images of planting, weeding, tending, nurturing a non-linear growth process.

This emerging reframe is important because it offers a different paradigm in terms of actions and solutions. This re-story is particularly relevant in consideration of myriad diverse identities and cultural contexts, with accompanying power differentials. Rather than definitive, dominant answers, this dialogical re-storying engenders expansive critical questions. This approach cultivates a process, rather than builds a case. Critical questions

include: How does centering trustworthiness rather than trust as the aim clarify accountability? Reframe roles, responsibilities, functions, and tasks? Redefine success? How could this emphasis on trustworthiness impact justice, liberation, equity, human rights, and wellbeing efforts—in all contexts? How might cultivation of trustworthiness change our views and approaches toward nurturing continuous, iterative growth, as contrasted with constructing a finished, linear product?

These questions are not merely rhetorical. The questions we ask determine the solutions we seek and the directions we pursue. Thus, these emerging key questions offer important guidance toward an expansive narrative that cultivates trustworthiness rather than a dominant paradigm that demands trust—in all aspects.

Further Considerations and Future Directions

The parameters of this article present several limitations in focus and scope. For example, although the proposed paradigm shift provides an important reframe to guide practice, this article does not provide a checklist of practice behaviors or action steps. Rather, using narrative and story-telling, it provides an explicit critical critique of the dominant narrative around trust versus trustworthiness and proposes a narrative more congruent with social work ethics. Instead of asserting definitive answers, I offer an initial consideration of critical questions to guide practice, whilst inviting further dialogue and development.

As such, the perspective of this article is both informed and limited. Significant future scholarship—including practice wisdom narratives—is needed to develop this area. Practice applications, professional implications, and specific actions that both challenge and implement the proposed ethical shift will inform future directions in ensuring that social work is a trustworthy profession.

The purpose of ethics is to guide in right decisions, directions, and actions. As eloquently expressed by Rory Truell, IFSW Secretary-General,

> Values and ethics are the glue that binds the [social work] profession...they are a guide that helps us through complex challenges. They...can be used as lens for understanding all the circumstances we encounter (Marson, 2023, p.19).

With this evocation, re-storying trustworthiness is an ethical imperative. Shifting from "trust" to "trustworthiness" as the aim is an ethical "re-right." I hope this article contributes by critically considering this topic and offering an initial reframing in the discussion. I hope it invites more study, dialogue, and practice of cultivating trustworthiness that nurtures a more just and joyful world for all.

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