



# Australian Academy *of the Humanities*

## Trust and its discontents

Workshop | 26 September 2018 | Melbourne

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#AAHTrust

A field-guide to everyday  
social pathologies of distrust

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# Overview

1. Why misplaced distrust matters every bit as much as misplaced trust.
2. Explicating core concepts: trust, trustworthiness, rich trustworthiness.
3. Failures in signaling uptake: affect, social prejudice and communicating trustworthiness.
4. Some suggestions for remedy.

“Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me”?

**Do not assume that wisdom = favouring caution = favouring distrust.**

The costs of trusting the untrustworthy are obvious, but they need not be greater than the costs of distrusting the trustworthy:

- Opportunity costs for the distrusting
- Opportunity costs to the unfairly distrusted
- The harms of to others of disrespect and demoralization from being singled out for pre-emptive distrust. (My focus today.)

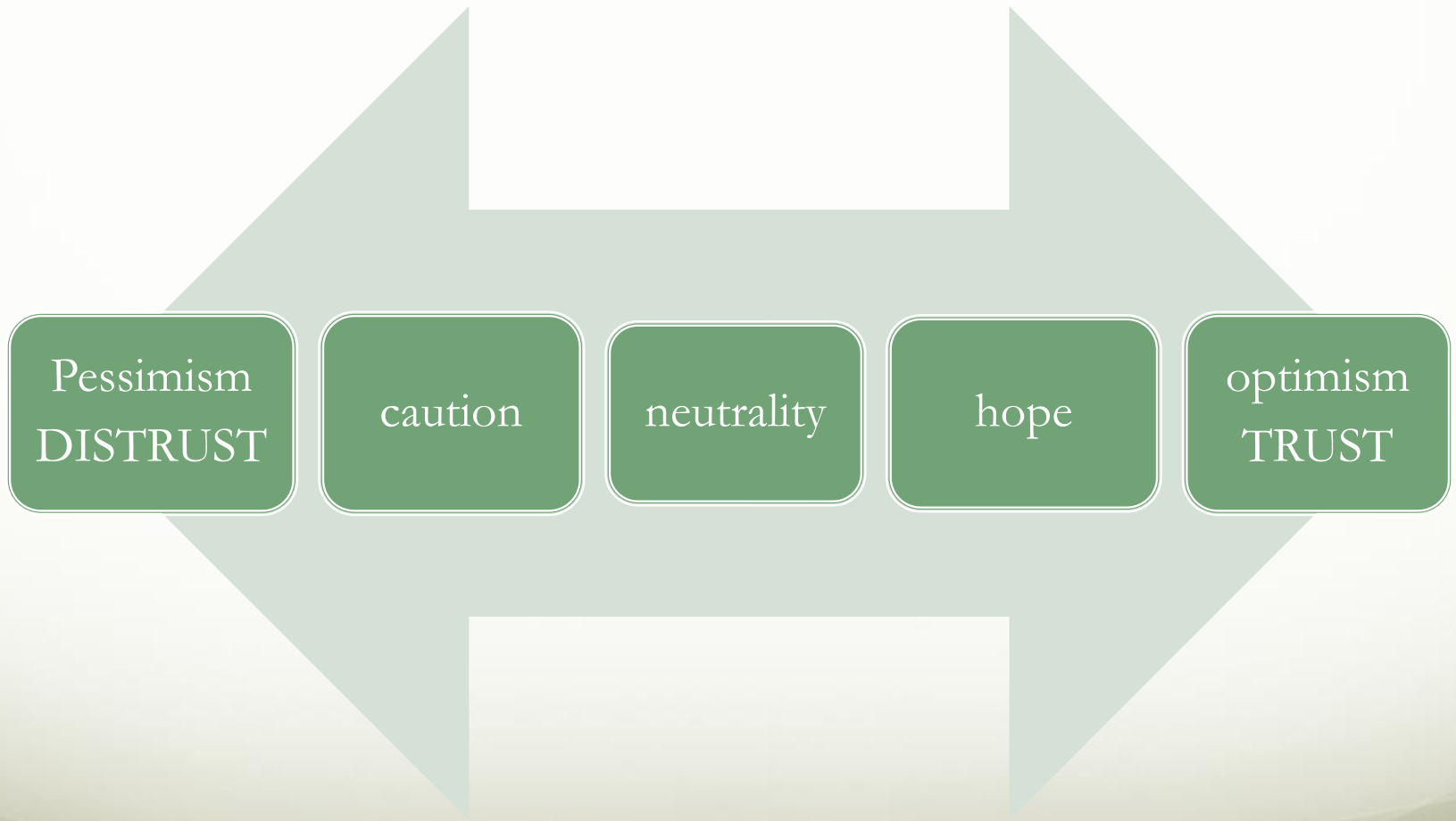
# What is trust?

On my account, trust is one of a spectrum of affective, or *emotional* attitudes, that one can take towards one's vulnerability to other agents.

Trust is *not*:

1. A belief that the other is trustworthy
2. The action of entrusting or relying on someone else

# Trust is an affective attitude



## More precisely

***Trust*** – A trusts B in domain of interaction D if and only if, A has an *attitude of optimism* that B's *competence* and *responsiveness* to her dependency will extend to cover that domain.

When we trust, we have an attitude of optimism regarding the other's willingness to be directly and favorably moved by the fact that we are counting on them. This attitude has the biasing roles characteristic of affect and so is partly constituted by a disposition to have “trusting interpretations” which shape our perception of risk, making the risks of incompetence and let down cease to be salient.

Trust *reveals* itself in willing reliance but is not itself a species of reliance.

## Three-place trustworthiness

***Three-place trustworthiness*** – B is trustworthy with respect to A in domain of interaction D, if and only if she is *competent* with respect to that domain, and she *would* take the fact that A is counting on her, *were* A to do so in this domain, to be a *compelling* reason for acting as counted on.

But we not only want that there be people who will enable us to extend the efficacy of our agency by doing on our behalf that which we cannot do alone, we want those who are up for (or not up for) a particular kind of dependency to identify themselves. Those who are willing to do this show an additional strand in their responsiveness to the inevitable fact of human dependency. Call them richly trustworthy.”



## Rich trustworthiness

*Rich trustworthiness* – B is richly trustworthy with respect to A just in case (i) B is willing and able reliably to signal to A those domains in which B is competent and will take the fact that A is counting on her, were A to do so, to be a compelling reason for acting as counted on and (ii) there are at least some relatively central domains in which B will be responsive to the fact of A's dependency in the manner specified in (i). (Jones 2012)

We are always already signalling, using mechanisms from formal (certification) to informal (comportment, hairstyle, etc). But there's noise in sending and receiving signals.

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# Heroic signaling against the willful resistance of prejudice

I became an expert in the language of fear. Couples locked arms and reaches for each other's hand when they saw me. Some crossed to the other side of the street. ... I tried to be innocuous but I didn't know how ... I began to avoid people. I turned out of my way into side streets to spare them the sense that they were being stalked ... Out of nervousness I began to whistle and discovered I was good at it. My whistle was pure and sweet and also in tune. On the street at night I whistled popular tunes from the Beatles and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The tension drained from people's bodies when they heard me. A few even smiled as they passed me in the dark. (Brent Staples, "Black Men and Public Space" Harper's Magazine (December 1986))

# (Dis)Trust and the hallmarks of affect

## 1. Evidence tampering

- Distrust evidence-tampers by shaping how we interpret the evidence we have.
- It can make us deaf to perfectly decent signaling.
- There can be enough evidence available for us to believe that someone is trustworthy in a domain and yet we do not trust because our capacity to interpret that evidence is undermined by our distrust.
- Prejudice and stereotype work this way.

# (Dis)Trust and the hallmarks of affect

2. **Recalcitrance:** occurs when judgement and affect part company; e.g. phobias and emotional lag.
  - Our (dis)trust can part company from our beliefs about who is trustworthy.
  - (Dis)trust is largely the unreflective result of our social experiences and reflects our prejudices and cognitive habits as much as our judgements about trustworthiness.
  - To think of (dis)trust as simply a matter of judgment and choice is to locate it too shallowly within the agent's psyche.

# (Dis)Trust and the hallmarks of affect

3. **Spillover:** happens when an attitude loses focus on its original target and spreads to neighbouring targets.
  - Distrust overgeneralizes in this way.
  - Example: Jayant Patel, known as Dr Death.

## Remedy: some suggestions for correcting the behavior of politicians and the media

- Media reporting fosters spillover with unnecessary mention of the race or ethnicity of minority offenders without marking the race of non-minority offenders.
- Use of the (false) “illegals” for asylum seekers, linking them with criminality and so activating the trust-phobic emotion of fear.
- Newspapers and television foster recalcitrance by sensationalist reporting of dramatic but isolated instances of untrustworthiness. Sensationalist reporting gives salience and felt immediacy to risks that are in fact relatively small. Such reporting, lacking in context and background, makes it difficult for people to judge the probability of risk and makes risk the focus of an anxiety in excess of what is justified.

## Remedy: some suggestions for correcting the behavior of politicians and the media

- Politicians manipulating a mismatch between trust and distrust. A small problem, or no real problem at all, gets blown out of proportion and made the focus of an anxiety that politicians then offer to address by tough “crackdown” policies.