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INTRODUCTION



Introduction to the special issue: Trust and vulnerability

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Trust research has long treated vulnerability as a conceptual given: necessary, assumed, yet seldom examined in its own right. As relations between people, organisations, technologies, and even countries become increasingly interdependent, opaque, and sometimes strained, understanding the dynamics between trust and vulnerability has never been more urgent. This Special Issue opens dialogue across disciplines, exploring how vulnerability and trust are enacted, negotiated, and made meaningful within the shifting terrain of contemporary life.

KEYWORDS

Vulnerability-in-trust;
ontology; epistemology;
trust practitioners;
interdisciplinarity

Trust is widely recognised as inseparable from vulnerability, an emphasis added by trust scholars across disciplines for decades (Baier, 1986; Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). As seminal definitions of trust posit, it constitutes a trust-granting party's willingness to be vulnerable in relation to the trust-receiving party, based on positive expectations regarding their intentions or future behaviour (Rousseau et al., 1998). In turn, vulnerability denotes a state of exposure and susceptibility to potential harm or loss (Brown et al., 2017; Fulmer et al., 2025). Thus, as Luhmann (1988) succinctly observes, trust manifests in contexts where 'there is more to lose than to gain.'

Much attention has been devoted to the various dimensions, forms, and types of trust (e.g. Dirks & de Jong, 2022; McEvily & Tortoriello, 2011). However, efforts to theorise vulnerability have not kept pace with those addressing trust itself, whether in terms of its forms, qualities, or intensities. Existing work has yet to clarify when and how vulnerability functions as a precondition for trust and when it emerges as a consequence. A void also exists in understanding the lived experience of vulnerability; that is, how it is felt, experienced, and navigated in practice (Schafheitle et al., 2023).

This is slowly changing, not least because vulnerability itself becomes more salient under contemporary conditions. The question of how vulnerability emerges and is sensed, processed, and normalised in relationships is thus increasingly difficult to ignore, and the study of Weibel et al. (2023), for instance, exemplifies this for the context of smart technology implementation at work. Another sign of this shift is, for instance, a recent Special Topic Forum of the *Academy of Management Review* (Korsgaard et al., 2025) examining how contemporary (technological) transformations shape trust theory via two central themes: (1) the importance of human agency in forming and maintaining trust and, notably, (2) the relevance of vulnerability to the trust process.

Connecting with the latter theme, our Special Issue turns much more closely to the lived, situated, and relational experience of vulnerability and its relationship with trust, enabling distinct scholarly perspectives to vividly engage one another within emblematic empirical contexts. Together, the papers in this Special Issue shed light on hitherto neglected onto-epistemological foundations of vulnerability and thereby also of trust.

This existing knowledge shortage on vulnerability is significant for at least two reasons. First, Tsoukas (2017) reminds us that social science theory should aim not to simplify complex organisational phenomena, but to complexify our understanding, because theoretical sophistication is necessary to do justice to organisational and relational complexity (p. 133). Trust and vulnerability exemplify this need: complex theorising is conjunctive, connecting diverse elements of human experience while preserving the ‘living-forward – understanding-backward’ dialectic, thereby capturing the logic required from trust practice (p. 132). Second, advancing trust research as engaged scholarship explicitly calls for moving beyond simplified explanatory models, such as independent – dependent variables or linear causal frameworks (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021 call this ‘explaining and comprehending theory’), toward understanding the processual ‘how’ of trust, including how vulnerability is experienced, managed, and responded to in relational contexts (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021, p. 496 on enacting or provoking theory).

Against this backdrop, examining how vulnerability is currently conceptualised in trust research becomes necessary. A closer look into the current knowledge in the vulnerability-in-trust literature reveals a dominance of explaining and ordering types of theoretical accounts, treating vulnerability and trust, in the words of Sandberg and Alvesson (2021, p. 496), as ‘a more or less given out there’ or, at best, as ‘socially defined but more or less given’ phenomena. Within this perspective, two narratives are dominant: a volitional one, rooted in a rational choice logic, and an existential one, rooted in social psychology and sociology. Following the dominant rational-choice approaches, particularly influential in organisational behaviour research, vulnerability is primarily understood in relation to risk and ‘something important that could be lost’ (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 721). Within this tradition, vulnerability in trust is largely seen as volitional. Trust is defined as ‘the willingness to take a risk in a relationship’ (Mayer et al., 1995), or, as Hamm et al. (2024) reason, as a ‘focal vulnerability.’ This willingness is typically explained by two factors: a trustor’s general disposition to assume vulnerability, rooted in their personality, and their perception of another’s trustworthiness, based on an evaluation of the trustee’s ability, benevolence, and integrity cues (Mayer et al., 1995). In sum, trust depends on a calculated readiness to risk exposure, and vulnerability is considered a cognitive psychological state resulting from an evaluative decision to (maybe) expose oneself to potential loss.

A second stream of research conceptualises vulnerability not as something chosen, but as a given, as an existential condition inherent in social relations. Within this tradition, vulnerability-in-trust is seen as ever-present and inevitable: Deutsch (1958) and later (Luhmann, 1988, p. 97) emphasise that ‘trust presupposes a situation of risk,’ with the perception of a potential loss, such as the ‘awareness of being at somebody’s mercy,’ fundamentally required for trust to emerge. Similarly, Beckert (2005, p. 18) frames trust as ‘a tranquilizer in social relations, enabling the trust-giver to remain calm despite their inability to control the actions of the trust-taker.’ Vulnerability is not a matter of choice but is conceptualised as an antecedent condition of trust, with trust, or distrust, functioning as a mechanism for navigating the ever-present uncertainties of relational life.

Both traditions, however, leave open the question of how vulnerability is actually lived, situated, and experienced. The work of Ballinger, Schoorman, and Sharma (2025) has made a commendable initial effort to not only foster dialogue between the two traditions but also offer a springboard for advancing the vulnerability-in-trust literature toward enactment and provocation (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021). Still situated in the rational-choice tradition, where trust is treated as a conscious decision, they introduce the notion of ‘vulnerability experience’ into their process model. Here, vulnerability must be actively regulated, and emotions such as hope and fear, elicited by new or updated information about the trustee, are considered central in determining whether protective behaviours emerge during this phase (p. 4).

A different way of approaching lived vulnerability can be found in the existential tradition. Möllering (2006) offers a well-developed formulation of this ontology: vulnerability is not chosen but given, and trust becomes possible through a ‘leap of faith’ in which the trustor temporarily brackets awareness of this ever-present exposure. The leap makes trustable what is structurally uncontrollable. In this logic, which aligns with Luhmann (1988) and even more explicitly with Simmel (1950) and Giddens (1993), vulnerability is a fundamental condition of social life, whereas trust is better understood as a practical response to this unavoidable condition. Still missing, however, are accounts that explicitly take this alternative ontology seriously and develop its implications for how vulnerability is surfaced, interpreted, and handled in concrete relational episodes. In what follows, we distil and connect the manuscripts in this Special Issue to advance our theorising towards enactment and provocation (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021) and, as such, enable the much-needed dialogical synthesis of vulnerability-in-trust insights across scholarly domains. We aim to showcase this alongside three features – (1) ontology, (2) epistemology, and (3) theory – to enrich and advance our understanding of these two concepts that are central to human life and social relationships.

Different ontologies inside the vulnerability-in-trust literature

Most of the existing vulnerability-in-trust literature is built on an entity ontology: one that treats vulnerability as a state and as something that may be analyzed, adjusted, or regulated through identifiable mechanisms. A broader conceptualisation is increasingly called for (Schoorman et al., 2025). The multidisciplinary review by Fulmer et al. (2025) moves in this direction by distinguishing several analytical dimensions of vulnerability: external exposure, internal susceptibility to harm or loss, and vulnerability as a felt experience. Their review also highlights that trust itself may function as a vulnerability-management strategy, by extending or withholding trust and thereby modulating exposure and susceptibility. Within such an entity-based ontology, delineating patterns becomes possible: for instance, how vulnerability and hope interact, or how new information elicits fear, which then triggers protective behaviour (Ballinger et al., 2025). We argue, however, that an entity ontology remains limited. Specifically, it detaches us from the lived experience of those who engage in the everyday ‘trust work’ forward required to accomplish trusting. Instead, it remains a backward analysis. It also imposes a flat ontology: only what manifests is considered causally relevant, whereas underlying generative mechanisms of vulnerability’s emergence are left aside.

An alternative is a process ontology in which trust is understood as an accomplishment – as practice – and vulnerability as a background condition of acting in the social world. In contrast to entity-based thinking, vulnerability becomes salient when practice is disrupted, when bracketing fails, and when practitioners must explicitly cope with trust ruptures. The process of bracketing thus becomes focal: how vulnerability is rendered salient, how practitioners manage it, and what forms of coping are mobilised. This orientation sheds light on the inner journey and competencies of ‘trust practitioners’ as they sustain trust through practice. It also highlights how vulnerability may lead to small regulatory adjustments within practice, or, when practice halts, to more fundamental processes of sensebreaking (the disruption or loss of previously taken-for-granted meanings) and resensemaking (the active reconstruction of meaning in the aftermath of disruption, see also Gustafsson et al., 2021). A phenomenology of vulnerability and trusting thereby becomes possible. Moreover, such an approach allows us to foreground contexts usually treated as controlled, as well as to account for conjunctive, non-observable generative mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of vulnerability.

The articles selected for this Special Issue strongly support and vividly illustrate this shift to a process ontology. Starting with Hatch’s (2025) theological account of ‘perspectival vulnerability,’ we see trusting as an ongoing experience of enduring trustee opacity; that is, the inability to access the other’s intentions given their (temporary) absence or incomprehensibility. She illustrates this feature of vulnerability and trusting with reference to medieval theology and developmental psychology. Contrary to an entity ontology, whereby trust would involve a single leap to a stable state of trust, Hatch proposes to treat trusting as a temporally extended posture. She presents the ‘vulnerability phase’ (Ballinger et al., 2025) as a process of maintaining hopeful anticipation towards an absent divine (or human) other.

Harrer’s (2025) conceptual development of ‘contextualized vulnerability’ calls for an understanding of vulnerability and trust beyond any focal dyadic relationships. By mobilising Sloterdijk’s sphereology, she also moves from an entity ontology to a process ontology whereby vulnerability is constructed and managed through interactions across overlapping life-worlds. She describes micro trust decisions as continuous recalibrations of vulnerability and dynamic bodily instantiations of trusting. Accordingly, her key question is not how vulnerable someone is (entity ontology) but how much vulnerability someone can handle at a specific moment in a stream of embedded interactions (process ontology).

Sousa-Duarte and Brown (2025) also focus on the dynamic experience of vulnerability in complex life-worlds. A core idea, matching Harrer (2025) but grounded in ethnomethodology, is that trustors learn how to ‘navigate’ vulnerability, especially in times of disruption. The empirical case that they study shows how vulnerability is not just given (e.g. due to power asymmetry [entity ontology]) but constantly interpreted (process ontology) and applied to the question of whom one can trust, as well as one’s contingent identity.

Nielsen et al. (2025) similarly apply an ethnomethodological approach. Starting with the notion that vulnerability is situated, their conversation-analytical research leads them to develop the concept of ‘observable vulnerability,’ which deviates from the idea of vulnerability as a given entity and instead highlights how carefully it is displayed, negotiated, and managed in interactions. In doing so, they also bring in the

trustee side, showing, in line with a process ontology, how trust is a practical accomplishment shared by all parties involved. Very much like Harrer (2025), they highlight the dynamic (re-) calibration of what kind of vulnerability is made 'observable' so that trusting becomes possible.

Cohen (2025) can (and maybe should) be read as a critique of an entity ontology of trust and vulnerability. He argues that research must look beyond material harm and consider much more the expressive harm and damage to relationships that breaches of trust can cause. In line with a process ontology, he emphasises that trusting – and any acceptance of vulnerability – is more than a precondition for some kind of transactional arrangement. Instead, it relates to an ongoing commitment within a moral community. Hence, trustees risk exclusion when they cause expressive and relational harm, even when the material harm might seem negligible.

Different epistemologies inside the vulnerability-in-trust literature

Rational-choice approaches generally presuppose boundedly rational self-interest, meaning that individuals pursue their own goals with limited information, cognitive constraints, and imperfect foresight. In the (vulnerability-in-)trust literature, this is articulated as the claim that 'willingness to be vulnerable' depends on uncertainty-related perceptions of another's trustworthiness. Trust here functions as a cognitive shortcut and a bridging device. When additional information is costly to obtain but the promise of a successful transaction is attractive enough, actors engage in 'risk-taking-in-the-relationship.' The Ballinger et al. (2025) model underscores this by emphasising the time lag between risk-taking and outcome and by examining how learning processes unfold in this interval.

In contrast to this framing, a practice-oriented epistemology insists that knowledge is not simply cognitive but deeply embodied (Seligman, 2021). Skilled practitioners need not consciously evaluate every piece of information; rather, they develop the ability to scan the background while engaging in trust work (i.e. the everyday actions through which trust is built and maintained, see Möllering, 2024). This shifts the trust research focus more toward understanding how such 'wisdom-in-practice' is built and sustained, and, as such, it introduces epistemological considerations largely absent from positivist approaches. Particularly, human actors are not merely information seekers but, more so, strong evaluators: normative commitments, moral judgments, and identity concerns matter profoundly. For instance, the aspiration to be(come) a 'trust worker' or the determination to hold on to trusting are key dimensions that shape whether, when, and how vulnerability is de-bracketed. These aspects remain underexplored in the vulnerability-in-trust literature but are likely crucial.

How vulnerability is embodied and thus shaped not just out of 'cold' cognition comes through strongly in this Special Issue. Harrer (2025) highlights spatial embeddedness as the driver for the 'bodily' experience of vulnerability, although she does not reduce this to the momentary setting of an interaction, but also notes how preceding experiences in one life-world shape subsequent interactions in another life-world. This is far from any notion of a detached, rational assessment.

Similarly, Nielsen et al. (2025) treat trust as 'embodied,' given the open-ended nature of conversations and the communicative practices, or 'trust tests,' in which trustors and

trustees engage. They identify four practices: displaying, topicalizing, mitigating, and alleviating vulnerability. All serve to 'manage' trust, but clearly more in the sense of embodied and experiential coping than in the sense of rational optimisation.

Sousa-Duarte and Brown (2025) reveal an impressive range of (non-rational) practices that the studied person, Florence, engages in to manage her vulnerability. Most interesting, to us, are the deference to authorities and spiritual forces as well as references to socialisation. Because Florence knows that her vulnerability goes far beyond financial matters, she desperately looks for reasons to bracket off her current negative experiences of vulnerability. Similar to Harrer (2025) and Nielsen et al. (2025), this study shows how people actively work on trust, attempting to make meaning and maintain it even in the face of challenging circumstances and events.

Hatch (2025) centres her analysis on the challenging circumstances of experiencing vulnerability while (mostly) not being able to build on responses from trustees, because they are out of reach. Her analysis of medieval theological literature points to literary and devotional practice as active maintenance work that makes the impossibility of cognitive certainty endurable, but without 'accepting harm or abandoning discernment.' This supports a practice-oriented epistemology that also foregrounds emotional efforts in trusting in the face of perspectival vulnerability.

Finally, Cohen (2025) focuses explicitly on a philosophical analysis of the material, expressive, and relational structures of vulnerability, and he does not conceptualise psychological processes or practices of trusting. Nevertheless, his call for accounts of vulnerability that go beyond material harm suggests, at least to us as Guest Editors, a move away from cognitive – calculative explanations of why people accept vulnerability. This is because expressive harm and any damage to a relationship (as such) would appear to be much less 'calculable' than the value of a broken item, a lost contract, a medical bill, or other tangible outcomes of betrayal. We would assume, further, that expressive harm will be highly situational and require a process of sensemaking or what Nielsen et al. (2025) call 'experiential coping,' such as via emotional processing and reinterpretation of events. This is supported by Sousa-Duarte and Brown (2025), who note how an actor is 'more than just financially vulnerable' and the experience of betrayal is a fundamental and deeply emotional social challenge.

Different theories inside the vulnerability-in-trust literature

Tsoukas (2017) and Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) have provocatively argued for more complex theories: those that not only explain the world but make it meaningful and manageable. Yet trust research, including studies on vulnerability, has tended to remain on the simplifying side by identifying only a few key variables and their linkages, resulting in theories that are predominantly explanatory or even predictive. In response to this limitation, we argue that the (vulnerability-in-)trust literature would benefit from different kinds of theories and particularly from those that embrace complexity. In doing so, we extend Möllering's (2018) call for more research on 'embedded trust' in complex network relationships (e.g. Zolin & Gibbons, 2015), which emphasises that trust is not an isolated dyadic phenomenon but one shaped by interdependencies across organisational and social networks. Answering this call requires theoretical approaches capable of grasping how trust and vulnerability are co-constituted within

embedded, multi-actor contexts – precisely the kind of complex theorising this Special Issue seeks to advance.

Practically, we aim to comprehend theories that place vulnerability at the centre and attend to how trust practitioners make meaning of it. Here, concepts such as sensebreaking and resensemaking (the disruption of established meanings and their subsequent reconstruction) can help us better capture how vulnerability shapes trust practices. Furthermore, enacting theories are greatly needed, and we engage in research that explores how vulnerability is coped with in practice, how trust is accomplished and re-accomplished, and how practitioners respond to rupture. Beyond that, and from a more critical management perspective, we know little about how reflective agents (trust workers) actively reshape the grounds of trusting and vulnerability-in-trusting – for instance, by undermining non-affording organisational practices or reproducing affording ones. Finally, room exists for provoking theories; that is, perspectives that treat vulnerability-in-trust as an emancipatory practice or, conversely, that interrogate how ‘leaps of faith’ may be instrumentalized in power-laden contexts, such as organisational hierarchies, surveillance regimes, or digitally monitored work environments.

The five papers in this Special Issue offer conceptual innovations that contribute to developing a theory of trust and vulnerability capable of capturing complexity, agency, and struggle. Beyond the recognition of multiple vulnerabilities (Sousa-Duarte & Brown, 2025; Cohen, 2025), the authors introduce several conceptualizations to illustrate the multiplicity of lived vulnerability: ‘perspectival vulnerability’ (Hatch, 2025), ‘contextualized vulnerability’ (Harrer, 2025), and ‘observable vulnerability’ (Nielsen et al., 2025).

Readers will also notice that ethnomethodology provides the theoretical backdrop for two contributions (Sousa-Duarte & Brown, 2025; Nielsen et al., 2025), whereas Harrer (2025) brings Sloterdijk’s sphereology into trust research. Hatch (2025) combines the theological lens of *deus absconditus* with classical trust frameworks from attachment theory in developmental psychology, and Cohen (2025) grounds his moral-philosophical perspective in concepts of commitment and attachment. Collectively, these papers present trust and (accepted) vulnerability as singular social accomplishments (see also Karpik, 2014).

In sum, advancing our understanding of the vulnerability-in-trust literature requires movement beyond disciplinary silos. Following Choi and Pak (2007), multidisciplinary brings together knowledge from different fields but remains within their respective boundaries. Interdisciplinarity, by contrast, seeks to analyze, synthesise, and harmonise insights across disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity goes a step further, integrating the natural, social, and health sciences within a humanities context, thereby transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries. Each of these approaches holds value: together, they enable us to confront complex, real-world phenomena, generate richer questions, and develop frameworks that reflect the multifaceted nature of trust and vulnerability. We call for future vulnerability-in-trust researchers to be mindful and explicit about their approach to silo-bridging.

Our Special Issue contributes to this effort by identifying three key features that can serve as entry points for such interdisciplinary engagement. Yet these features are only a starting point – a scaffold for how an ongoing and transdisciplinary dialogue across disciplines might be structured and deepened. Although this Special Issue can open conceptual spaces and provoke reflection, it alone cannot resolve the epistemic,

methodological, and practical tensions that such engagement entails. Future research must thus take up the challenge of cultivating sustained interdisciplinary dialogue, where theorising trust and vulnerability becomes a shared endeavour across diverse domains of knowledge. If successful, such collaboration will not only advance transdisciplinary understanding but also reimagine what it means to study, practice, and live trust in vulnerable times – a commitment to which we, as engaged scholars of trust, have pledged ourselves.

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