A Journey to Understand Trust in Interpersonal Relationships

John K. Rempel

My early career was defined by the work that I did with John Holmes on the construct of trust. During my undergraduate and graduate studies and in the early part of my career, I gave a lot of thought to the concept of trust and how it operates in close relationships. However, after a series of articles had established and tested some of the basic ideas, I moved on to other topics and for the next 30 years or so, my focus on trust was largely limited to how I taught about trust in my courses.

In those 30 plus years I delved into research on an eclectic mix of semi-related topics together with a number of colleagues and students – in particular my colleague Chis Burris and my partner Lynn Rempel. I have always been drawn to broad conceptual ideas and have taught, studied, and written about topics such as love and hate, good and evil, morality and values, emotion and motivation, social power, the extended sense of self, restorative justice, empathy, human sexuality, sexual misconduct and abuse, parent-infant relationships, social support and parenting teamwork.

I will acknowledge that studying a wide range of research topics is not necessarily a career path that I would advocate for new scholars who are trying to establish themselves as experts in a field. It does seem rather scattered and unfocused, at least on the surface. However, I would argue that these topics do share some common underlying themes. First, they all build on the basic human need for being in relationship, with a special focus on our closest, most intimate relationships. Second, all of these topics tie into fundamental concepts such as motives of acquisition and defense, cooperation and dominance, autonomy and connection. Most importantly, these constructs do not operate in isolation, they interact and help us understand why we humans operate and interact the way we do.

Now, many years later, I have returned to the topic of trust, with a specific focus on the processes needed for rebuilding trust in a close relationship after a violation or betrayal. Although my research focus had changed multiple times over the years, I continued to teach about trust in my classes and my ideas about trust have not remained static. In this paper I will begin by providing an overview of my early work. I will highlight both what I think that we accomplished and also what remained incomplete. I will then present thoughts on how my ideas on trust have developed over the years as new research has accumulated. Finally, I will end with a brief overview of how these expanded ideas fit into my current work on rebuilding trust.

Early Thinking and Research on Trust

Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985). An initial study, based on my undergraduate honour's thesis, was published in 1985 (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). By today's standards, this study was seriously under-powered and, consequently, any results should be treated as preliminary. Nonetheless, for two reasons this paper has had a substantial, lasting impact. First,

in this paper we offered a theoretical foundation for understanding trust as an interpersonal process. Prior to this paper, trust had largely been treated as a characteristic that individuals brings to their interactions with generalized others. In contrast, we argued that, even though people may enter into interactions with a generalized sense of trust, the level of trust that ultimately emerges in any given relationship is a unique property of that specific dyad.

Second, this paper gave the world a scale to measure trust in close relationships. I would argue that this measure, which is now 40 years old, has held up well and continues to have validity. However, I would also argue that this is due more to the nature of trust itself than it is to any timeless insights on my part. I have long argued that trust is a very robust construct and measurement items can be quite varied as long as they tap into the basic properties that characterize trust. These basic properties were captured in our deliberately broad definition of trust – *"a generalized expectation related to the subjective probability an individual assigns to the occurrence of some set of future events".* Consequently, according to this definition, as long as a measure assesses the level of confidence in an expected future outcome, then it is measuring trust – the specific item content can be determined by the research domain. Of course there is value in having a measure that offers some consistency from one study to the next and, understandably, many researchers have an affinity for the ease and regularity of standardized, validated scales. This is something that our paper offered to researchers when it appeared, and I continue to get requests to be able to use and translate the scale from researchers around the world.

Holmes and Rempel (1989). Over the next few years, as I moved into graduate work, our thinking and research on trust continued to progress and evolve. In 1989, John Holmes and I published a follow-up chapter that elaborated on our earlier work and expanded some of our key ideas. In our initial paper we had distinguished between levels of abstraction in trust targets. People's expectations could focus on their partner's specific concrete behaviors (Predictability), they could focus on beliefs about their partner's more stable dispositions and attitudes (Reliability), and they could focus on experiences of emotional security in a partner's interpersonal motives (Faith). We found that Faith, an abstract feeling of emotional security, was most strongly correlated with measures of love and happiness and was uniquely tied to perceptions of a partner's intrinsic motivation.

In our chapter four years later, we built on our growing recognition that abstract expectations subsume a variety of more specific behaviors, beliefs and feelings. Specifically, we focused on what I have described in my classes as "the one thing that every person wants in an intimate partner" – someone who is sensitive to their partner and can be counted on to moderate their own self-interest and take their partner's needs into account as they respond in ways that prioritize their partner's well-being. With this as the foundational focus of trust in intimate relationships, we developed more complex theories for how trust develops and the ongoing impact that trust has on relationship functioning.

With respect to the impact of trust, we presented data testing the hypothesis that trust can shape the attributions and interpretations of a partner's positive and negative behaviors. In a laboratory study, 82 established couples discussed a difficult issue in their relationship. The recorded discussion was then replayed for each partner separately and partners rated the positivity or negativity of any events that had an emotional impact on them. However, prior to the discussion, one third of the couples were individually asked to recall a specific instance where a problem between them was resolved and their partner was responsive to their needs. Another third of the couples recalled instances where they were left disappointed by their partner's lack of responsiveness, and the couples in the remaining third formed a control group in which they were simply asked to take a few moments to consider the issue that they would be discussing.

Importantly, in this article we considered the level of trust to arise from the dialectic between peoples' feelings of security and doubt and argued that the balance of these two factors produces a phenomenological experience that transitions at several meaningful "tipping points". High trust reflects a profound sense of security that leaves very little room for doubt. The future feels safe and outcomes are anticipated with high levels of certainty. If feelings of doubt increase to a level where outcomes are no longer certain, there is a tipping point that transitions into medium trust. At moderate levels of trust, feelings of doubt cannot be confidently set aside and the future is less secure. As certainty declines still further and doubts grow, there is another tipping point into low trust. Now, with feelings of uncertainty and doubt as the default expectation, suspicion and the need for vigilance are a common experience.

The results of our study clearly showed the impact that trust can have on how people make sense of behaviors in their relationship and the pattern of results was meaningfully distinct for high, medium, and low trust couples based on a tertile split of their averaged trust scores. People in high trust relationships were consistently positive overall compared to medium and low trust couples. More strikingly, their emotional reactions were the most positive in the condition where they recalled a negative, disappointing incident. Thus, high trust partners appear to integrate their negative experiences into a broader relationship perspective that is dominated by an overarching positive framework.

For couples at medium trust levels, the pattern of results was notably different. Despite reporting comparatively high levels of relationship satisfaction, these couples rated their interactions as significantly more negative than high trust couples. In fact, their ratings were comparable to those made by low trust couples. More importantly, medium trust couples in the positive recall condition rated their partner's behaviors as significantly more positive than those in the control condition but their attributions to their partner's motives were significantly more negative. It appears that medium trust couples were struggling to balance their hopes and fears. Both negative and positive events take on greater significance and prompt greater vigilance – a finding that was subsequently supported in a creative set of studies by Campbell et al) – but their feelings of ambivalence give priority to the desire to avoid further hurt and disappointment. Negative events are more likely to be taken at face value whereas there is reluctance to attribute

positive behaviors to positive motives. Medium trust couples report still having a desirable relationship but, in using a risk-averse hypothesis testing strategy, they have set the bar for confirming their hopes very high.

Of all couples, those in low trust relationships rated their partner's behaviors most negatively and these ratings did not differ as a function of recall condition. There is a glimmer of hope in the data – ratings of their partner's motives were significantly higher in the positive recall condition – but the overall picture remains grim, especially given that spontaneous instances of positive recall in these relationships are likely to be comparatively rare. Rather, the overall objective of low trust partners appears to be one of self-protection and risk-aversion brought on by low expectations that the partner can be counted on to demonstrate caring or responsiveness. These couples may retain some residual hopes but, in a context dominated by doubt and uncertainty, the risks of embracing these hopes are too high. They are more attuned to signs of threat and vulnerability.

Rempel, Ross, & Holmes (2001). A subsequent paper based on my doctoral thesis (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001) further expanded our understanding of the impact that trust can have on the way people make sense of events in their relationship. Using the data from the 35 couples in the control condition of the previously described study, I coded all attributional statements both partners made about the issue that they were discussing. These openly expressed attributions could then be compared to the private behavioral and motivational ratings that couples had made during the video replay procedure.

Consistent with hypotheses, high trust couples offered the most globally positive public attributions and these attributions mirrored the positivity found in their private ratings. Thus, these positive expressions would further reinforce and strengthen their already elevated levels of trust.

In their public attributions, medium trust couples put their risk-avoidant hypothesis-testing strategy on full display. They focused far more on global, negative attributions than did high trust couples. To some extent even low trust couples were more positive. Importantly, this level of negativity did not fully align with the comparatively more positive attributions they made in their private judgments of their partner's motives. Thus, it appears that medium trust couples may be using accusatory attributions as a way to elicit reassuring responses from their partner. Despite the risk that this approach may be self-defeating, there are some potential positives with such a strategy. First, it forces difficult issues out into the open and compels that they be addressed. More importantly, this approach ironically conveys an underlying message of hope. Medium trust individuals may feel uncertain in their relationship but they still feel that their relationship is worth fighting for and they feel safe enough and hopeful enough to risk openly expressing their negativity and challenging their partner.

Individuals in low trust couples show the greatest disconnect between their private and public attributions. The public attributions expressed in low trust relationships were deceptively benign

even as their private attributions showed the highest levels of negativity. Thus, their outward veneer of civility reflects an underlying goal of self-preservation and relational withdrawal. When a partner cannot be trusted to respond in a caring way, the risks of confrontation are too great and the likelihood of positive outcomes too small. Unless the issue is truly "a hill worth dying on", avoidance is safer than engagement.

With this study there are also two additional take-home messages. First, the attributional patterns identified for trust persisted after controlling for relationship satisfaction. Trust and satisfaction may often be very highly correlated but they are distinct psychological processes. Second, people with the lowest levels of trust may not be easily identified. Whereas people might expect those who confront, challenge, and publicly disagree to be the least trusting, these are the medium trust people who have not yet given up hope. Rather, it is the disengaged, often silent and uninvolved partners, employees, or citizens who are the least invested and, perhaps, in some contexts pose the greatest threat, precisely because they have stopped caring.

Miller and Rempel (2004). Throughout my early research on trust, the primary focus was on understanding the impact of trust on relationships. However, there was, and continues to be, little research on the development of trust. That said, I did conduct one study that at least started to address trust development by looking at changes of trust over time. I had collected longitudinal data across a two-year period and an honour's thesis student, Paul Miller (Miller & Rempel, 2004), learned how to conduct some complex statistical analyses to analyze the data. We found that trust and motivational attributions were mutually reinforcing over time. In particular, it was the willingness or unwillingness of people to attribute positive motives to their partner, even when they felt that their partner had behaved badly, that predicted whether trust increased or decreased two years later. That is, changes in trust could be explained, not so much by the behavioral outcomes that people experienced in a conflict situation, but by how those events were interpreted and seen to reflect the partner's underlying motives. Thus, we found that attributional processes may be particularly important for understanding the evolution of trust in close relationships.

Rethinking Trust

As I think back to my early days working as an undergraduate and graduate student with John Holmes, I remember them as exciting and intellectually stimulating times. More than just a thesis advisor, John went on to become my mentor, collaborator, and friend. Yes, we developed and tested some of our ideas around the impact of trust on how couples interact and make sense of their partner's behavior, but our wide-ranging discussions covered a lot of ground. In the years that followed, John continued to expand on his ideas with another, arguably more gifted, student, Sandra Murray. I have followed John and Sandra's work over the years and I can often catch glimpses of some ideas that John and I had talked about in our earlier discussions. Of course, these ideas have been creatively expanded in Sandra and John's insightful, award-winning collaborations. And, as I subsequently went on to other things, I continued to teach about trust in my interpersonal relationships classes and I continued to pay some attention to studies on trust

that appeared in the literature. These studies, developments in the field more broadly, and my own musings pushed me to rethink and expand how I thought about trust.

The Foundational Significance of Trust. Cottrell, Neuberg, and Li (2007) published a paper that reshaped some of my thinking about the importance of trust in human relationships. In a set of studies that effectively asked people to design the perfect relationship partner and group member, these researchers demonstrated the centrality of trust for relationships of all types. Regardless of relationship type, trust was the one characteristic that consistently rose to the top, in most cases occupying the number one position. I had always considered trust to be one of the most important processes in interpersonal relationships but, after seeing this data, I came to view trust as not merely important, but rather foundational. If a person cannot be trusted, everything else they say or do is open to question. Declarations of love and acts of caring are ways of exerting pressure to reciprocate, generous gifts become obligations to return the favor, solemn promises are manipulative lies. Through this study I came to see trust as "ground-zero" for interpersonal relationships.

However, more recently, I have come to see trust as an even more basic process. A literature search on theories of emotion led me to the biological concept of "allostasis" (Sterling & Eyer, 1988), an elaboration of the more familiar concept of homeostasis. In order to efficiently sustain their wellbeing and defend against or remove threats, organisms need to dynamically regulate their physiology to conserve their resources so that they acquire more energy than they expend. According to the idea of allostasis, physiological systems change in *anticipation* of the organism's fluctuating internal and external experiences and prepare the organism for what is expected to occur. By definition, these predictive processes will include some level of uncertainty. If correct, this idea puts the processes underlying trust at the center of brain activity. Indeed, Sterling & Laughlin (2015) hypothesize that the brain evolved as a structure for taking in, organizing, and coordinating this predictive process.

In my classes I had already been describing how we navigate our world with an ongoing series of moment-by-moment expectations, but the idea that this is a core biological process brought the fundamental nature of trust to a whole new level. That said, it is still important to recognize that we humans also have a pre-frontal cortex that allows for conscious, reflective, conceptual thinking. Processes such as learning, attribution, and interpretation can provide the possibility for more efficient and accurate predictions that allow us to prepare for, and potentially control, events in the immediate and long-term future (Atzil, Gao, Fradkin, & Feldman-Barrett, 2018). When we imagine, create, plan, teach, justify, tell stories, use language, and engage in complex social interactions our focus is often on anticipating the future and assessing the risks and benefits associated with various outcomes. Risk assessment – judgments on the extent to which a potential outcome is subjectively valued and the perceived likelihood that it will occur – is an inherent part of any prediction and fits well with the idea that a central goal for our predictive brains is to reduce uncertainty in our physical and social world. Thus, the basis for trust may be wired into our neurological systems.

Defining Trust. From the outset we defined trust as "confident expectations in positive outcomes from an intimate partner – abstract positive expectations that they can count on their partner to care for them and be responsive to their needs, now and in the future" (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). There are two key elements in this definition – first, there is an expected future outcome and second, there is a level of confidence that this expectation will materialize. As with most trust definitions, the expected outcomes are positive.

Our premise that the basic psychological process underlying trust is *the implicit or explicit level of certainty that the future will unfold as expected* has remained constant over the years, but certain elements have evolved. First, most definitions of trust, including ours, implicitly associated the expectation of negative outcomes with low trust. Yet, certainty is as applicable to negative expectations as it is to positive expectations. Claiming that you can "trust your enemy to do you harm" is neither incomprehensible nor illogical. At the same time, although confidently expecting negative outcomes is arguably a form of trust, most people would not label it as such. Indeed, they would almost assuredly claim that a person who wishes them harm can *not* be trusted. Therefore, because it is important to distinguish between confidence in positive and negative expectations, I have followed the lead of other scholars such as Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema (2018) and labelled confidence in negative expectations as "distrust". Moreover, just as confidence in positive expectations has tipping points, I hypothesize that, changes in certainty of negative outcomes will have their own tipping points based on shifting levels of confidence and doubt. Nonetheless, distrust is distinct from a truly low trust position where certainty in a target's actions is effectively absent. In a truly low trust situation, an expected outcome may be positive, negative, or anywhere in-between – you simply don't know.

Second, if the core psychological process underlying trust is the experience of certainty assigned to an expectation, then the objects or targets that can be trusted are virtually limitless. Any outcome that can be expected will have an associated level of certainty. So, not surprisingly, trust has been studied in a wide range of contexts including trust in social norms, institutions and organizations, political and social structures, purchased products such as computers and self-driving cars, artificial intelligence – the list goes on (e.g., Bozic, 2017; Esterwood & Robert, 2021; Mayer et al., 1995; Nie et al., 2018).

Third, trust is often thought of as a conscious, rational, albeit subjective, process – a calculated probability assessment regarding the likelihood that an outcome will occur as anticipated. Murray et al. (2011) labelled this form as "reflective" trust and they distinguished reflective trust from a second form of "impulsive" trust that is based on affective sources. In a series of studies using subliminal priming, manipulations of working memory, and experimental manipulations of threat, Murray et al. (2011) showed that individuals often based their actions on impulsive trust, especially when working memory capacity is low.

The idea that trust can be experienced primarily as an intuitive emotional sensation intersects well with the concept of "felt security" found in the attachment literature (Bowlby, 1973). In his influential theories of human development, Erikson (1963) postulated that trust vs mistrust was

the first crisis that human beings need to navigate. Infant trust, as described in these developmental theories, is going to take the form of automatic, unconscious feelings of security. Of course, cognitive, rational forms of trust will increasingly emerge throughout a individual's development. Yet both forms of trust will persist. They will also inevitably interact, sometimes bolstering each other and sometimes conflicting. They are also likely to vary depending on whether a cognitive sense of confidence or an emotional sense of security is most salient at a given point in time. Thus, different sources of certainty can interact and shape each other over time.

Although current measures of trust may tap into some aspects of emotional experiences, they almost all rely on various forms of conscious, cognitive judgment. I have currently come to recognize the importance of more precisely differentiating between these forms of trust and I am starting to work on ways that each can be measured.

The Breakdown of Trust. I have recently returned to studying trust by focusing on an aspect that has received surprisingly little research attention – how trust can break down and how it can be rebuilt. Admittedly, much of my early work with John Holmes highlighted how attributional processes can result in trust being self-sustaining and difficult to dislodge (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Single acts of disregard cannot easily invalidate a history of supportive, caring behavior because they can be minimized, reinterpreted, or compartmentalized. Similarly, if trust is low, a handful of positive experiences cannot erase a history of uncertainty or disregard.

Yet, despite such resilience, trust can change over time and the direction of change is not symmetrical. It is widely argued that trust is easier to break down than it is to build up (e.g., Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan, & Murnighan, 2008; Rempel et al., 1985). To understand why, we need to consider the high bar that people set for feeling secure and confident. As noted earlier, high trust effectively means that doubt and insecurity are virtually nonexistent. This high standard leaves little room for trust to be increased by expansive acts of compassion and self-sacrifice because they must exceed an already elevated level of positive expectations. But this high standard leaves a lot of room for trust to fall.

There are two broad ways in which trust can decrease. Even in relationships with a storehouse of secure interactions, attributional patterns are not unalterable. Unresponsive behaviors that may have been explained away in the past can be difficult to dismiss if they continue to accumulate. If doubts then take root, less magnanimous attributions may acquire more credibility, not only for current experiences, but also for past events that can now be reinterpreted and marshalled to bolster current doubts. Thus, ongoing negative experiences can chip away at trust.

Then, there are those behaviors that can fully demolish whatever protective attributions may have been in place – infidelity, interpersonal violence, callously broken confidences can all decimate even the highest levels of trust. Therefore, in ways that are rarely seen when trust is being built, it is possible for single dramatic acts to leave trust completely shattered.

A Return to Research on Trust

Rebuilding Trust. Over the years I have taught how trust develops and how these same processes play out in contexts where trust has been damaged or broken down. In particular, I noted that, trust will be rebuilt from the same sources, principles, and actions that established it in the first place – only now, because this is occurring against the backdrop of the transgressor's proven capacity for untrustworthiness and betrayal, these actions need to meet higher standards. For a long time, this material remained conceptual. I made some tentative efforts to study this process in more detail but quickly found that it is difficult to do. In particular, it was challenging to find research participants who were willing to share their experiences of betrayal and rebuilding. This slowed my research progress substantially and I suspect this also plays a large role in why research on rebuilding trust has been comparatively sparse. Nonetheless, in the last few years, I, together with my former honour's student Connery Knox, have made some significant progress.

In his honour's thesis, Connery collected data from individuals who reported on how they rebuilt trust in their relationship, either when they were the transgressor or the victim of betrayal. Connery and I subsequently contributed a chapter on rebuilding trust to the Handbook of Trust and Social Psychology (Rempel & Knox, 2025), edited by the late Ken Rotenberg (who sadly died as this volume was nearing completion). In developing our conceptual model, we integrated data from Connery's thesis, research from the organizational psychology literature (where there has been considerably more research on trust), and the qualitative therapeutic literature, much of which we found online.

In this chapter we proposed a theory of rebuilding trust based on two primary processes, 1) the internal desire to rebuild trust and 2) the external, tangible manifestations of that desire. Specifically, we suggested that transgressors need to internalize the pro-relationship goal of caring about the victim's wellbeing and demonstrate to the victim that this goal is genuine. Similarly, victims need to value a relationship with the transgressor enough to give them a chance to prove their trustworthiness. The idea that transgressors must first commit to being trustworthy and that victims must first commit to giving the transgressor a chance to prove that they can be trusted may seem patently obvious, but this self-evident quality highlights how centrally important it is for both transgressor and victim to share a commitment to the other, the relationship, and the immense task of rebuilding trust in their relationship – nothing can move forward without it.

An important aspect of this focus on commitment is that it may not initially be something that either partner necessarily *wants* to do. Michael Johnson (1973) proposed a model of commitment based on different phenomenological experiences that vary in the extent to which the goal is freely chosen. People can commit to remaining in a relationship because they "want to", because they "ought to", or because they "have to". Of particular relevance is the experience of "ought to", which Johnson labels Moral Commitment. Unlike "wanting to" stay (Personal

Commitment), in which staying is a desired, freely chosen outcome, or "having to" stay (Structural Commitment) in which staying is a forced requirement where the freedom to choose has been suppressed, Moral Commitment reflects a personal choice to constrain desired outcomes in order to fulfill other valued goals. For example, the decision to stay may be made in order to fulfill other goals such as keeping a promise or ensuring the well-being of close others. Thus, Moral Commitment is an experience that blends freedom with constraint, albeit constraint that is personally applied rather than externally imposed. We suspect that victims in particular may not begin with "wanting to" trust their partner again, especially when the hurt is still raw and the risk of further injury looms large (Kim et al., 2009). Instead, they may start with feeling that they "ought to" stay in their relationship and give their partner a chance with the hope that "want to" is something that they can move toward over time.

We also propose that there is no recipe or checklist for what needs to be done. Transgressors may need to examine their own motives and goals, deal with their own deeper personal issues, or consider the costs, challenges, and benefits of committing to rebuilding trust. Victims may need to consider what it will take to rebuild trust and whether they have the cognitive and emotional resources to make themselves vulnerable again and move towards forgiveness. Transgressors and victims *may* need to do some or all of these things – or they may not. However, all will need to consider the nature of their internal goals, assess how much they value their partner, their relationship, and their own wellbeing and decide whether or not to move forward with rebuilding trust.

Then comes the task of translating these intentions into behavior. Both transgressors and victims will need convey their internal desires for rebuilding trust to each other by way of fallible, imprecise words and actions that can ultimately be interpreted in multiple ways. Consequently, the second goal is for transgressors to act in ways that can be interpreted as trustworthy and for victims to show that they are giving transgressors the opportunity to demonstrate their trustworthiness. As with internalized goals, there is no definitive recipe or checklist for how to do this. What is important to some may be irrelevant to others. However, in all cases trustworthiness needs to be communicated through words and actions that are sensitive and responsive to the partners needs and convey the desire to rebuild the relationship. Supporting this idea of firm commitment to pro-relationship motivation and flexible means of expression, a study by Knox and Rempel (2024) that retrospectively investigated an extensive list of trust-rebuilding actions found that commitment-related actions predicted rebuilt trust uniquely over other trust rebuilding actions, such as apologizing or being extremely consistent.

In presenting our model, we have emphasized that there is no one right way to do things – they are all wrong. And, of course, they can also all be right. That is, every word and act, however well-intentioned and sincere, is still open to re-interpretation. Even if someone were to do everything correctly, these efforts could still be reinterpreted or dismissed. Thus, rebuilding trust cannot be accomplished alone. Instead, it is a mutual process that requires each partner to internalize basic goals. The interaction of the victim's and transgressor's goals form the

foundation for our theory of rebuilding trust and from them emerge some basic principles for what is required for these goals to be realized: honesty and authenticity, sensitivity and responsiveness, openness and transparency, a willingness to be vulnerable, acceptance and forgiveness, and a sense of working together as a team. These principles are not unique to rebuilding trust – they are really just the basic responses that we all want and hope for in our relationships. However, they take on added significance in the context of rebuilding after a betrayal and the specific words and deeds that operationalize these principles will be unique to each dyad.

Trust and Forgiveness. Work on rebuilding trust has quite naturally extended to ideas on forgiveness. Along with some honour's students, I conducted some studies designed to identify the core process that define forgiveness. We conceived of forgiveness as a psychological process of acceptance and inclusion, and trust measures were added to these studies almost as an afterthought. I must admit that I was actually surprised to see that trust was the strongest predictor of forgiveness (the irony is not lost on me). After having already run some of our own studies, I discovered the excellent work by Peter Strelan (2025) that had already demonstrated the central role of trust in forgiveness. Had I found this work earlier, I wouldn't have been at all surprised by our findings.

However, we did not just reinvent the wheel. In our studies, commitment, particularly Moral Commitment, regularly appeared as an additional independent predictor of forgiveness. This is consistent with our model of rebuilding trust in which we propose that commitment may allow victims to initially place transgressors in a "wait and see" holding pattern before extending full forgiveness. As evidence of the transgressor's trustworthiness accumulates, this can transition to genuine internal forgiveness.

By hypothesizing transitions in forgiving, we are conceptualizing forgiveness as a process rather than a one-time event – something that can resurface, ebb, and flow over an extended period of time. Specifically, we regard forgiveness as a decision-making process involving the self, the transgressor, and the relationship. As a decision-making process, forgiveness is characterized by variation in the extent to which it is a free choice. The phenomenological experiences of "want to", "ought to", and "have to" that Johnson conceptualized for commitment are in fact applicable to any decision-making process and they have implicitly appeared in the forgiveness literature. Forgiveness scholars have distinguished between forgiveness as an emotional transformation of motivation, a behavioral decision, and an externally imposed obligation.

Our data, as well as Strelan's, indicate that trust plays a central role in the forgiveness process. Specifically, we consider trust to be the primary mechanism that moves the forgiveness process along from feelings of "have to" or "ought to" to "want to". As trust grows, forgiveness can increasingly progress toward feeling increasingly like a free-choice experience. Relationship commitment plays a central role in providing the space for trust, and therefore forgiveness, to

progress. Commitment is particularly important for maintaining relationship stability, thereby providing the time and context needed for trust to be rebuilt and forgiveness internalized.

Conclusion

In this overview of my research journey on trust, I feel a great debt of gratitude for the work of others. Much credit belongs to John Holmes. Our collaborations and fruitful discussions set a strong foundation. The insightful work of other researchers has shaped my understanding of trust as a fundamental psychological construct that is part of our physiological and social processes. The journey now continues as I am once again studying trust, this time with the hope of making both a theoretical and a practical contribution.

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