TRUST AND CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS - AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

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Associates, who use partnering as a form of cooperation, need to trust each other. However, even if one considers trust to be an expectation of good will, the partners will still need to have an understanding on the terms of their cooperation. How reflexivity and tactful action might enhance trust, cooperation and mutual understanding is here investigated in depth from a personal perspective. This auto-ethnographic study draws on the personal experiences of the author, who runs a construction business. The layered text account serves as a tool to explore multiple levels of reflection. An investigation is undertaken to consider the underlying patterns of judgements of trust, as well as the shifting nature of the context. Negotiators do not possess a sufficient understanding to effectively judge when to trust a partner. However, through the application of tactful action and reflexive investigation of one's self, one's partner and the context of the situation, a better understanding and better judgements of trust can be achieved. For those seeking partnerships in construction projects, one should not underestimate the importance of critically reflecting on their own practice and their own understanding of others.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, negotiation, partnering, reflexivity, trust.

INTRODUCTION

In the presented research, I seek to contribute to our understanding of the role that trust plays in negotiations. I use Baier's (1986) concept of trust in which the trustor relinquishes discretionary power over things valued to the trustee. The trustor expects the trustee to exercise goodwill and competence, without having complete knowledge of and control over the trustee (Baier 1986). Here, I will focus on the interplay of trust, cooperation and mutual understanding of negotiation partners.

"Trust is a matter of reflexivity" and it develops gradually (Möllering 2006: 102). I will show how active engagement in reflexivity supported my trust judgements. Therefore I applied concepts stemming from qualitative research to my managerial practice.

For more than 15 years, I have been running my own construction business with 38 employees, most of whom are bricklayers and carpenters. My job requires me to negotiate on a daily basis. I will investigate my experience in negotiating with business partners. I use the term *"negotiation"* to refer to most of my interactions in the business environment. This includes, of course, face-to-face negotiations, as well as all other means of communication such as phone calls, emails, letters, etc. Using this definition, each and every act of communication is an act of negotiating.

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The approach used is auto-ethnography. In general, ethnographers become part of the setting they attempt to study. They participate in activities in order to observe the communities first-hand and collect extensive field-notes about their observations and experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). As auto-ethnographer I am already part of the setting I study. I am native to the setting. In auto-ethnography, autobiography and ethnography merge (Reed-Danahay 1997). In auto-ethnography the research examines the relationship between the self and society by drawing on personal experiences (Ellington and Ellis 2008). I am both subject and object of the investigation process (Scott-Hoy and Ellis 2008).

Previous ethnographic work in construction industry dealt predominantly with topics around actual construction work (Pink, Tutt and Dainty 2013). Though, Sage (2013), for instance, investigated management practices but struggled to get access to building sites and Marshall and Bresnen (2013), sought to follow where action in construction management took place. I am native to the field and my daily business takes me naturally where the action is. I can, due to my job position, offer a *"long-term [18 months] engagement with a research context"* (Pink *et al*. 2010: 4). However, I may not maintain my *"ethnographic distance"* (Sage 2013) resulting in a more subjective account. Nevertheless, I may contribute to the knowledge of construction management since my auto-ethnographic approach enables me to explore *"issues from the perspectives of the individual level"* (Phua 2013: 168) and to *"tap into the 'lived experience' of partnering"* from within (Bresnen 2009: 932). I collected field-notes about my negotiations – usually written in the evenings after the event. These field-notes are my predominant source of data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

The disinterested, omniscient voice of an objective researcher would surely jeopardize the authenticity of this research. Hence, I am going to use the first person or, as Ellis (2004) coined it, *"the ethnographic I"*. Here, I am telling my story *"as a narrator, a person with a point of view"* and so *"an embodied person responsible for [my] words"* (Richardson 1990: 27). Even my analysis is just another *"narrative, another point of [my personal] view"*(Richardson 1990: 27). Therefore, a departure from the narrative first person would suggest an objective view that would be misleading to the reader.

My experiences in my business environment are unique. Generalizations from such experiences need to be treated with a great level of suspicion (Van Manen 1990). However, my *"own experiences are also possible experiences of others"* (Van Manen 1990: 54). I want to produce a text *"in which readers can keep in their minds […] the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience"* (Ellis 2004: 30). In order to write about my understanding of my negotiating relationships in my company I will highlight my experiences with field-notes in italics. These will be presented under a series of themed headings. In order to explore and analyse the meaning and connections of my experiences, I seek to reflect on them deeply. Apart from questioning causal assumptions, I need to uncover prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions about my own judgments (Brookfield 1995). In order to effectively learn from my experiences I need to reflect in multiple ways, questioning the underlying patterns of my actions and thoughts (Brookfield 1995). Rambo Ronai (1995) provides an effective example of how such thought processes can be conveyed to the reader by using a layered text account. In this paper, I will use this technique. Three asterisks (***) will signal a shift in perspective and help the reader to understand the text.

THE EXPLORATION

In this section, I will analyse negotiations with an engineer about a single project.

The context

We made major alterations on a residential, mid-19th century building. The house was owned by a family. The architect had close connections to that family. He negotiated our contract on the family's behalf and also commissioned the other contractors, including the engineering firm. One of the goals in renovating the building was to enhance the load capacity of the foundation. The project engineer suggested deepening the foundations through the designated underpinnings. I thought a sole plate would suffice, at only a fraction of the cost. When I got the design from the civil engineer, I told the architect in charge of the project that I had a cheaper solution in mind and asked if I should propose it to the engineer. He supported my proposal.

*** Integrative negotiating

Both solutions would have worked for me – they would have been almost equally profitable. I assumed, that, like in most projects, the budget would be limited. The costlier solution would have put a great strain on the budget, and, in the long run, I may have faced with the consequences of that strain. Saving some money now might leave some room for concessions in later negotiations. Therefore, both the architect and I ultimately benefited from this economy.

My efforts to save some money now created a mutually beneficial situation for the future, when I was able to request something from the architect in return. That day, I saved money for my architect and at a later point I saw him somehow obliged to share it with me in form of a concession. I made a concession on a low priority issue in order to make future gains on an high priority issue (Thompson 2011) in an attempt to display a *"give and take attitude"* (Bresnen 2009: 928).

*** Trust relationship architect

In this situation, I gave the architect valuable information, which he could have exploited without honouring my efforts. I handed over some discretionary powers to the architect over things I valued, hence, I trusted the architect (Baier 1986). I expected some sort of reciprocity from the architect, although I did not know whether he would live up to my expectations (Pettit 1995). Hence, this situation contained elements which indicated a trust-based relationship, namely, to cede power over things valued, privileged knowledge, and positive expectations, while having limited ability to control or punish (Baier 1986).

Had I not trusted the architect, I would have kept my knowledge secret and we would not have started to cooperate to reduce costs. Therefore, trust was a prerequisite of cooperation (Baier 1986).

The first personal encounter

I called the engineer briefly and explained my proposal. We agreed to meet on the building site. We started analysing the situation and he explained to me how he arrived at his proposed solution. I tried to explain my approach to solving the underlying geotechnical problem. During the negotiation, I explained my proposal in detail it to him and suggested a design and what the construction details could look like. Simply put, he wanted to make the foundation deeper and I wanted to make it

wider. Both solutions would lead to an increased load capacity. We discussed the pros and cons of both solutions. At some point I struggled to explain my proposal sufficiently so that the engineer could understand it. However, we agreed to incorporate my proposal in the design. After some days of reflection and work, he arrived at nearly the same solution that I had.

*** Trust relationship engineer

In this meeting, I provided the engineer with even more information than the architect. In so doing, I also entrusted him with my knowledge. I expected him to incorporate this into his design. Furthermore, I hoped to achieve economies and, consequently, to build a working example of cooperation. Therefore, I was dependent on the outcome of this meeting.

Things worked out to my great satisfaction and my proposed plan was selected. The engineer lived up to my expectations. Hence, my initial trust was supported by a positive experience which strengthened my trust in the engineer (Child 2001). But the meeting had to provide more to our trust relationship than that.

Getting to know each other

Our conversation was not limited to discussing the technical details of the foundation, and eventually it turned personal. We talked about our time as students, where we studied, that we both earned civil engineering degrees and the major subjects of our studies.

During our talk, I sometimes got the impression that the engineer was well-trained but lacked some experience and, with it, the self-confidence of older engineers.

*** Context engineer

This personal information about the engineer helped me to put him – and his personality – into context. First, I assessed questions of his background – in this case his education. Second, I compared our common experience with my prior experiences with other engineers.

I was actually looking for parallels in the engineer's education and my own – I am civil engineer too. Consequently, I assumed that he may arrive at technical solutions similar to mine, and that he has enough technical knowledge to be open to an exchange between engineers. In other words, I expected him to understand what I am talking about and to think similarly about the discussed issues.

*** Trust relationship

Baier (1986: 236) asks, *"What do you trust to them?"* By incorporating his context into my judgement of trust, I sought to answer the question with 'what' should I trust to him. The 'what' in this case was that I expected him to understand the technical situation very close to my understanding. At that point, the 'what' had little to do with our personal values or attitudes. It was specific to that particular problem. I thought he assessed the foundation problem like I did.

*** My own context

This judgement is profoundly guided by my own experience with older, more confident engineers. They used to evaluate my proposals on the respective cases at a very high level. For them, it would have been easy to explain the technical advantages and disadvantages of my proposed solutions. I compared his responses to these

experiences, and attempted to judge his level of technical competence and self-confidence.

At that point, I thought he lacked some confidence. He is a couple of years younger than I am. But this is not the crucial point.

*** Inscription of my own context

There was the subtle consideration of how he came to choose the underpinnings, what he considered and what he did not consider. But more importantly, why did he not take my approach or something similar, in the first place. He could understand the geotechnical underpinnings of my solution, but he had not thought things through in the same way.

On different projects and with different engineers, I had already considered other engineers' solutions that were similar to mine, but disregarded them for various reasons. Next, we engaged in an advanced exchange over how to tackle the emerging technical disadvantages. Usually, such discussions are marked by at least some slightly defensive argumentation. Some sort of face-saving resolves these initial problems.

But here we were far from that stage. I considered this young engineer to be 'weaker' than the other engineers. It is not that he made a mistake, but for me, the strength of an engineer is his or her ability to contribute creative solutions and broaden the spectrum of possibilities. I want to build something I regard as good professional work, something that I can be proud of as an engineer. But at this moment, I felt obstructed from achieving this.

*** Connection between assessment and trust relation

This 'weakness' in engineering terms did not stop me from trusting him as he carried out his duties as engineer. I became more alert to look for alternative solutions myself. So I assess tacitly with 'what' to trust him. However, this perceived 'weakness' had a limiting effect because I did not consider him to be as powerful or competent as other engineers (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995, Pettit 1995). Therefore, I could not trust him to the same extent and I became more vigilant about alternative solutions.

Second encounter

Later, when the construction process progressed, I had another negotiation about a possible technical solution for a special detail at this building site. This time, his boss was also present. We talked, sketched, calculated, and discussed for nearly two hours how to reinforce an old structure. The discussion unfolded around how it should be in theory and what is possible to apply in practice. However, this time the discussion was predominantly between me and his boss – the junior engineer was almost side-lined. The two engineers defended what the solution should ideally be, whereas I emphasised that their 'ideal' solution would cause more (collateral) damage than benefits. In the end, we agreed on a solution somewhere in the middle. However, what the engineer later designed and circulated differed significantly from what I perceived as the outcome of our meeting. At first sight, I thought, 'That's not what we came up with! I did not agree to this solution - not at all. How could he claim that this is the outcome of our discussion?' I felt betrayed. In my eyes, he was now lying about our meeting. Furthermore, I regarded this solution as a bad one.

Apart from my emotional reaction, I considered my judgement in trust to be misguided. At first, I did not understand what had happened. I was tempted to call him

and let off steam. But I did not do this, because I knew that that usually just makes such a situation worse.

*** Situated-ness and tact

This situation shows that reflecting on an event is often difficult because one *"cannot help but be 'unreflective"* (Van Manen 1995: 35). This being absorbed by the course of action and reaction made it difficult for me to understand what happened to me and within me. I was too emotionally invested in the situation to be able to be reflective and to begin to understand (Van Manen 1995). My reaction – deciding to not call – was informed by some sort of tacit knowledge and a feeling that it would be inappropriate to call given the mood I was in. It was what Van Manen (1995) called tactful action. However, later on, once I had calmed down, I would need to deal with that issue – reflect and act on it.

*** Technical-personal dimension

Before that meeting, I regarded the negotiations as rather technical. In our first meeting we discussed geotechnical issues, how to design the plate. Only later, he mentioned that he would like to discuss it with his boss first. For me, this is a fair point because in engineering, the four-eye-principle is very common. I regarded his actions as technically-driven rather than related to power issues on his team.

Prior to our second meeting, I had already made up my mind about him. In our first meeting, I had not paid any attention to the power configurations on his team. So my initial image of him was shaped by our exchange over technical questions and the positive experience.

My limited knowledge at this point led me to conclude that I can trust him with the engineering issues. In this case, I thought I had a technically-driven engineer who was open to alternative solutions. Therefore, when it came time to solve the next problem, I thought I just needed to meet with him and explain my take on the issue. In so doing, we would have come up with, in my eyes, a good solution. But apparently this was not exactly the case.

Calm

Only the next day - in a calmer mood - I understood that he might have been under pressure by his boss - who may have favoured the proposal he presented.

*** Revision by context

That evening, and the next day, I sought to re-evaluate my judgment in trust and came to the conclusion that I had overlooked some important issues. I had only looked at who he is, but I missed the context in which he had acted.

Upon further reflection, I remembered that his boss was not that comfortable with my solution. The solution the engineer presented was more of a reflection of his boss's viewpoint than our agreement. It looked like he had yielded to the pressure from his boss. And I had not included the boss's influence in my judgement in trust evaluation.

*** Perspective taking

Next, I tried to see things from the engineer's point of view. If I were to amend my judgment appropriately, I would have to take the perspective of the other. Although, it felt unpleasant to admit being wrong, it was an easy and epiphanic exercise. What this example shows is that taking a reflexive position questioning one's own assumptions inevitably leads to feeling uncomfortable about our own practice (Pillow 2003).

I had to revise my assessment. As in ethnography, I did not learn all at once, but rather in a continuous process, building new insights and understandings upon prior ones (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011). I had to acknowledge the back and forth in the reflexive process of making sense. The perspective-taking enabled me to look at myself as well. I can only see myself when I see the other (Pillow 2003). The nature of this process is hermeneutic. Hence, using reflexivity not only contributes to research but also to trust judgements.

Of course, I sought to avoid misinterpretations. However, they cannot be avoided since the process of interpretation is inherently incomplete (Iser 2000). It is, unfortunately, an ongoing and never ending process (Iser 2000, Pillow 2003).

*** Applied perspective taking–seeing myself

Retrospectively, I must admit that I did not think or actively assess his encounters with other contractors. That would have given me more of an idea about how he might have seen me. It is not uncommon that contractors seek to endorse a cheap but inferior solution for the sake of reducing costs. This runs contrary to the interests of an engineer. First and foremost, the engineer must design a functioning building. Reducing costs is a secondary consideration for most engineers, at least in Germany. When it comes to litigation about defective engineering, the design is usually compared to highest technical standards. In case the design delivered by the engineering company falls short of these standards, that often poses a liability for the engineering companies. I did not investigate whether he anticipated that I wanted to respect these high standards or suspected me of departing from them.

Given that his boss suspected me of going for lower standards, it must have appeared necessary for him to push through his proposal. Therefore, for the engineers, the second negotiation was framed by lower standard solutions and not by possible collateral damages.

*** Trust assessment

The point here is not so much that I was wrong in my interpretation. That is inevitable, since all interpretation is incomplete (e.g.; Iser 2000). It was that I had to learn about two procedural mistakes. First, I did not anticipate the other engineers' perspective (Pillow 2003). And second, I took my interpretation too seriously. I assumed it to be 'right'. I did not investigate whether or not other interpretations were possible and perhaps more likely. I addressed my observation too fast to "conceptual boxes" (Weick 2006: 1727).

I should have somehow questioned the underlying assumptions (Reynolds 1998). In this case, that meant taking into consideration the constraints and pressures that the engineer might have experienced. I assumed that my freedom to act as a business owner applied to him as well. But the engineer was employed, he found himself in a completely different power hierarchy. In hindsight, it seems that the team he worked on respected a quite rigid hierarchy, leaving little room for individuals to act independently. I lead my team differently leaving them more space and giving them more responsibilities.

The side-lining of the engineer by his boss should have alerted me. There were power-relations involved that were not present in my company to such a degree. That begs the question, how could I disregard them, how could I have missed them.

*** Distance for reflection

I needed some distance from the event in order to begin to understand his behaviour. Seeing the pressure the engineer might have experienced helped me to regard his action not as a breach of trust but rather as yielding to a greater power, that of his boss. Once I saw things from his perspective, it became clear that he was acting quite naturally given his work situation, and that I would have acted the same if faced with similar circumstances.

As Chiseri-Strater (1996: 119) wrote, 'turning upon ourselves […] makes us look subjectively and reflexively at how we are positioned'. Once I could see things from his point of view, I was in a far better position to make a judgement of trust. By adopting his perspective, I was able to anticipate the constraints he faced and his ability to act.

*** Making sense

In the course of the interactions, I experienced being thrown into the situation (Weick 2003) only being able to reflect limited on the events. Therefore, my judgement had to be imperfect. The ongoing nature of life itself, with its inherent changes and my limited capacity makes it impossible to arrive at a comprehensive picture. However, I had to deal with such a situation this time and will undoubtedly do so again in the future. A way of coping with such situations is using what Van Manen (1995: 7) referred to as *"tactful action"* – acting intuitively and with consideration at the same time – as in the moment when I did not call the engineer.

Reconciliation

Later in the process we (the architect, my engineers and I) did find a solution that reconciled our proposals and limited collateral damages while getting close to the ideal solution. Repeated phone calls, meetings on the building site, and constructive and open exchanges about each other's concerns helped to forge this solution.

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We arrived at the solution through a mix of mutual understanding. The engineers acknowledged our concerns about collateral damages and I could understand the issues they had with my solution. However, without tactful action, or worse, by seeking to push one solution through without regarding the concerns of the others, the situation would have certainly become tenser.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Considering this negotiation experience, I was able to explore how my judgements in trust evolved. I learned that I am able to refine my understanding of my negotiation partner more effectively if I can identify and acknowledge the different aspects of our relationship – namely technical exchange, power relations, education, and context. Through exploration of the meta-level, I was able to demonstrate how my own assumptions, experience and context influenced my judgement and expectations. Furthermore, by considering how others see me from their perspective, I developed a better understanding of the constraints my partner faced. I was able to later acknowledge that my emotional involvement might inhibit me temporarily from doing so. Tactful action helped to prevent an escalation of the conflict and gave me some space to reflect on the events.

However, my judgements were not and will never be comprehensive. They are by their very nature incomplete. I can never completely anticipate or understand another person. In this example, I learned that a third person's action might have influenced

the decisions of a negotiation partner, leaving me disappointed. I misperceived this as breach of trust.

Though, I have shown above that my misjudgements about trust led to my disappointment. I expected the engineer to behave in a way that he did not and perhaps could not do. Seeing it from this perspective, I can conclude that the engineer did not act in an untrustworthy manner, but rather, my expectations were misguided and resulted from my misjudgement of him and his situation.

Knowing that our judgments will always be incomplete, trust, partnering and cooperation are subject to constant (perceived) disappointment. However, it is worthwhile promoting them given the alternatives of conflict and litigation.

Our partners, our selves, and the world we live in are constantly evolving. In other words, we, and our contexts, are always changing. In order to develop more trusting relationships, we need to constantly reassess what we should entrust to others.

The changing nature of our world calls upon us to act tactfully. In so doing, we can avoid entering vicious spirals of mutual misunderstanding and distrust. Tactful action allows us the space we need to reflect critically on how we understand the world around us. This space to retreat and reflect is, of course, not unlimited. Therefore, we may then come to still imperfect but far better judgements of whom to trust with what. I conclude that it might prove worthwhile to make more effort to investigate our relationships in a reflexive manner.

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