Why the Epistemologies of Trust Researchers Matter

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ABSTRACT

In this thought piece we take stock of and evaluate the nature of knowledge production in the field of trust research by examining the epistemologies of 167 leading trust scholars, who responded to a short survey. Following a brief review of major epistemological perspectives we discuss the nature of the prevalent views and their geographical distribution within our field. We call on trust researchers to engage in epistemological reflection, develop their own awareness of alternative epistemologies, and ensure their work draws on and cites relevant research contrary to their preferred epistemological approach. To support this we ask editors of relevant journals to foster pluralism in trust research, publishing work from a range of epistemologies.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thought piece is to examine and assess the implications of the nature of knowledge produced and consumed in our field by examining the views of leading trust researchers (LTRs) regarding their own epistemologies – i.e. beliefs and assumptions about the nature of knowledge and what constitutes acceptable knowledge (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Although all social science research is conducted on the basis of philosophical, including epistemological, premises, (Burrell and Morgan 1979), there is widespread tendency among social scientists to avoid sustained examination and questioning of their own assumptions (Tsoukas and Chia 2011). Yet, whether they are aware of them or not, the researchers' epistemologies are intricately linked to other kinds of suppositions such as the nature of reality (ontology), the relationship between theory and practice (praxeology), and the researcher's role in the research process (axiology). Together these form research philosophies that have fundamental theoretical and methodological implications. Epistemological assumptions, in particular, shape research agendas, questions, methods, data analyses, and, ultimately, the knowledge researchers contribute to their field (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Tsoukas and Chia 2011). We therefore contend that it is crucial to examine the extent to which trust researchers are able and willing to reflect on and articulate their own epistemologies, and consider the implications of these epistemologies for knowledge they contribute to trust research. To stimulate debate in our research community we provide empirical insights and offer commentary regarding LTRs' answers when explicitly asked about their epistemological views.

Since the 1980s, there have been persistent calls for more reflexivity in management studies and, more generally, the social sciences (e.g. Ashmore 1989; Cunliffe 2003; Holland 1999; Tsoukas and Chia 2011), urging researchers to establish a meaningful, iterative relationship

between their research philosophy and research practice (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000). In the trans-disciplinary field of management studies (Saunders et al., 2016), such calls have often been tied to epistemological pluralism; the idea that epistemological diversity enriches the field and should be fostered (Knudsen 2003). These calls argue that researchers should be aware of a range of epistemologies rather than just their own or the dominant view. From a pluralist perspective, considering epistemological perspectives with an open mind, whilst questioning one's own assumptions and established orientations, is important in order to enable more innovative research that better reflects the complexity of worlds it investigates and thus provides more meaningful results which could inform practically relevant discourses and policies. Arguably, this is especially pertinent in our field given that trust is seen as multidimensional, dynamic and often tacit and ambiguous (Li, 2011), and trust research as multidisciplinary, drawing on different geographical, cultural and scientific traditions and speaking to different audiences (Lyon et al., 2015). Consequently, from this perspective it is important to examine the extent to which individual trust researchers not only (1) are aware of their own epistemological assumptions, and (2) reflect on the associated strengths and limitations, but also (3) consider alternatives.

Our thought piece addresses the above three points by analysing the explicit and implicit epistemological premises made by LTRs in our empirical study, and on this basis considers the underlying epistemologies within the trust research community. We commence with a brief overview of the epistemological landscape of the social sciences, in particular in terms of its major philosophical and geographical strongholds. This is followed by an overview of the methodology and key findings from our empirical study, which we conducted to examine the awareness, contents and distribution of epistemological positions held by LTRs. We conclude with considerations of why such positions should matter to both trust researchers and social science scholars in general.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERSITY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Epistemological diversity has characterised the social sciences since the 19th century (Ross 2003; Smith 1997), fields such as management and organisation studies becoming and remaining 'a historically contested terrain' (Reed 1996). This has been evident in the long-standing 'meta-theoretical' debates over, and struggles for resources and influence between different epistemological approaches (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2003).

The epistemological approaches most prominently featured in meta-theoretical debates are those associated with the following five research philosophies: positivism, interpretivism, critical realism, poststructuralism/postmodernism and pragmatism (e.g. Crotty, 1998; Tsoukas and Chia, 2011; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2013). Each of these philosophies is based on a very distinctive set of epistemological assumptions. Positivism advocates scientific, objective knowledge that is based on observable, measurable facts, and claims that it can predict future events (Donaldson 1997, 2003, 2005). Critical realism proposes 'epistemological relativism', meaning a variety of types of data and methods are seen as acceptable, although critical realist research often takes the form of a retroductive, historical analysis (Reed 2005). Proponents of critical realism also acknowledge that theories and knowledge never offer completely certain knowledge, and that 'social facts' are different from 'physical facts', but nevertheless that researchers should try to be as objective and realistic as they can (Bhaskar 1986; Fleetwood 2005). Interpretivism suggests that theories and concepts are inevitably too simplistic to represent the full richness of the social world, and that therefore the greater the diversity of interpretations, stories and narratives as well as historical context factors that researchers can gather, the more new understandings (knowledge) they can create through their research

(Crotty 1998; Hatch and Yanow 2003). Poststructuralism/postmodernism emphasises and seeks to examine the role of dominant political ideologies in the construction of what is generally known as 'truth', 'knowledge', and 'facts'. Knowledge is therefore considered 'deconstructive', questioning and challenging established discourses (Chia 2003; Luhman and Cunliffe 2013). Postmodernists aim to be radically reflexive (Cunliffe, 2003) and apply critical scrutiny to their own role as researchers in co-producing the knowledge they study. In contrast, pragmatism focuses on seeking, through a variety of methods and their combination, useful knowledge that enables successful action, providing solutions to problems and informing future practice (Dewey 1908 [1977]; Elkjaer and Simpson 2011). In this perspective the social world is seen as a constant stream of action, of which the researcher is simply a part.

Positivism is generally recognised as the currently dominant philosophy in the social sciences, including management research (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Crotty 1998; Üsdiken 2010). As the dominant philosophy it has attracted sustained critique from proponents of alternative perspectives, and also, from proponents of pluralism, for impoverishing the field by crowding out the potential for further understandings offered by other approaches (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Knudsen 2003). Yet there is recognition within the meta-theoretical literature of important geographical and historical distinctions within this overall pattern of dominance. For example, within the field of management research, the North American 'core' of the field is also recognised as the positivist core, whereas Europe, including the UK, is considered more open to alternative perspectives (Üsdiken 2010). From the turn of the millennium, the influence of US-led positivism is argued to have, again, significantly strengthened, enabled by the growing influence of 'global' rankings, league tables, journal lists and citation indices (Grey 2010; Üsdiken 2010), a process building on a self-referential logic, enabling dominant actors to define 'quality' for the field as a whole.

The question of whether the coexistence of multiple epistemologies is a 'curse' or a 'blessing' (Knudsen 2003) has long been a matter of heated meta-theoretical debates (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2003) across social sciences fields. Such debates have typically produced two opposing combatant sides: 'unificationists' who see coexisting epistemological approaches as a weakness and argue for a single, unified research paradigm in order to enable scientific progress, and 'pluralists' who argue that epistemological diversity enriches research (Knudsen 2003). In this contribution, we adopt the pluralist argument that the subject matter of social science research is too complex and multi-faceted to be properly understood from any single perspective, and that a sophisticated and rich palette of epistemological approaches is needed to make sense of social realities. Central to creating and maintaining such a palette is the fostering of researchers' 'radical reflexivity' (Cunliffe 2003). Scholars should therefore be critically aware of their own assumptions, applying the same scrutiny to these as they would to the beliefs of others (Gouldner 1970), thereby not only ensuring thought-out and coherent research projects but also sustaining awareness of and openness to alternative research possibilities. From this pluralist perspective, the positivist dominance in the social sciences is seen as counter-productive, as it marginalises valuable alternative approaches, curbs epistemological awareness and reflexivity, and impoverishes research fields (Grey 2010; Üsdiken 2010).

Epistemological reflexivity and pluralism are, we contend, particularly pertinent in the case of the complex and multidisciplinary field of trust research, which brings together various disciplines (e.g. management and organization studies, sociology, psychology) that are themselves already building on a diversity of traditions and orientations. As Lyon et al. (2015: 1) observe, this richness of the trust research field 'constantly reminds us how no single method can provide the perfect understanding of such a multifaceted phenomenon'. Despite this insight, we have found no research that examines the epistemologies of trust researchers. We

note Siebert et. al's (2015) recent call for increased methodological pluralism in trust research, but argue further that this must proceed from the more radical commitment to epistemological pluralism. Researchers are often isolated into their own separate groups held together by shared worldviews, where they speak specific languages which prevents them from communicating and operating outside of their own perspectives (Shepherd and Challanger 2013). Yet, epistemologically-pluralist research, 'if operationalized successfully, may allow us to learn the languages and practices of a wide range of academic communities' (Hassard 1991: 296) and, as illustrated by Li (2012), may offer alternative ways to reframe trust. Further, Lyon et. al's (2015) edited volume provides clear insights into how epistemological and consequently methodological pluralism can, and in fact already has, contributed to trust research: the different perspectives and different methods-offering a richer understanding of trust.

In our empirical study presented in the subsequent sections of this contribution, we consider the following questions about the views of leading trust researchers and the implications for the field:

- To what extent are LTRs aware of their own and alternative epistemological assumptions?

- What are the dominant epistemological orientations of LTRs?

- What are the implications of our findings for the status and future of the trust research field?

METHOD

As a team of authors we ourselves draw on diverse epistemological perspectives, encompassing interpretivism, poststructuralism and pragmatism. This diversity allowed us to investigate the responses from different points of view. For our empirical study, we chose scholars who have published the most cited articles in the trust literature, based on a title search in the SSCI Web of Science during March 2014 using 'trust' as the key word. First, all authors of articles with more than 100 citations were selected. As this approach, if used too naively, invariably privileges older articles we, second, reduced the number of citations required for inclusion in our sample for more recent articles adding articles published after 2000 with more than 50 citations and articles published after 2010 with more than 30 citations.

Despite this adjustment, we are aware that adopting citations as a measure of researchers' reputation has a number of limitations. Among these are: the inability to account for the content of citations and, more importantly given the nature of our research, the tendency of dominant approaches to generate more citations, simply by means of exploiting the advantages of larger knowledge 'markets'. Thus citation counts produce the very 'quality' they allegedly only measure, which in the context of our project would mean that we end up defining as 'leading trust researchers' those who publish within the dominant epistemological view (and are as a consequence highly cited). However, we should not, for this reason, neglect citations altogether. As Grey (2010: 678) acknowledges whilst being critical of measures such as citations, 'the structure of citations in a field is an important way of understanding intellectual communities'. Citations play a key role in contemporary academia as a measure of research quality, indicating what is considered legitimate knowledge, and thus in determining who counts as a 'leading researcher.' If we want to understand the assumptions of those who, under given circumstances, count as 'leading trust researchers' it thus seems justified, if not unavoidable, to draw on this measure despite its obvious limitations.

Using the criteria outlined above, our search yielded 315 LTRs. Of these, contact details were established for 265 LTRs., email addresses being found for all these potential respondents. An email survey (Dillman, 2007), comprising a brief introduction to the research and two open-ended questions, was sent to these 265 LTRs. They were asked to provide a 'short reply answering two questions about their [your] epistemological view' in relation to their highly cited article: (1) 'What was your epistemological view when you were writing the following article [Title of the article]?' and (2) 'Do you still have the same epistemological view? Has it ever changed?' The questions were followed by a list of major epistemological views as identified in the previous section (Table 1), to act as non-exclusive prompts. Initially 97 LTRs responded, this number increasing to 167 after the follow-up email, so that we achieved a response rate of 63%. Answers to the two questions ranged from a single short sentence of a few words for each question to an essay-like response of 660 words within which both questions were addressed, the median length of answer for both questions combined being 47 words. These data were integrated subsequently with demographic data obtained from the respondents' web sites, including their country of work at the time of publication of their highly cited article and which subject they had studied at which institution for their highest academic qualification.

Our data were analysed using a Mixed Methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010). Two of us coded independently each respondent's stated epistemological view (question 1) into one of the five epistemological views outlined earlier, 'some form of combination', 'no particular epistemology adopted' or an 'other' category (Table 1). Inter-rater reliability was very good (κ = .895; Fleiss et al., 2003), 92.2 per cent of ratings being identical. Where there were rating disagreements, our coding was debated, clarified and final codes agreed.

Our subsequent qualitative analysis of responses to question 2 followed Corley and Gioia's (2004) procedure. This provides a clear process for deriving themes and aggregate dimensions from respondents' answers. We began by identifying the emerging concepts referred to by our respondents and grouped them into categories using open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to generate 'first order concepts'. In doing this, we adopted principally our respondents' own language, using their descriptive statements to label categories. To help ensure the validity of our data, we each coded independently a sample of responses from which we each developed and agreed a coding scheme for grouping the first order categories. Using the agreed scheme, coding of the remaining responses was undertaken by the lead author, the final version being checked by all of us separately and then agreed after discussion. Second, following Corley and Gioia (2004) we each used axial coding to introduce our own interpretations, grouping first order concepts into broader second order themes. For example, data coded as 'lack of knowledge/familiarity', 'need to look up terms', 'studied a long time ago' and 'complex question' were grouped as 'unfamiliarity with the concept' (Figure 1). During axial coding, second order themes emerging from each of our independent categorizations of first order concepts were cross-checked, discussed, compared and, where necessary after checking the original transcript, re-categorized. Finally, themes were gathered together into a series of aggregate dimensions by looking for connections between them. For example the dimension 'understanding epistemology' comprised three second order themes of 'unfamiliarity with the concept', 'strengths and limitations' and 'no particular view'. Our development of second order themes and aggregate dimensions was not linear but recursive, continuing until we had a clear stable structure (Figure 1), providing, according to Corley and Gioia, a clear basis for delineating themes and aggregate dimensions. These were subsequently reviewed by an experienced qualitative researcher, who confirmed our coding and subsequent conclusions as plausible.

[Ideal place for Figure 1]

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND DOMINANT ORIENTATIONS

Our findings show that the majority of the most cited articles as well as the majority of LTRs are from North America, this being the dominant location of LTRs' institutions at the time their articles were published (Table 1). 74% of our respondents were male and 26% were female. Responses from some LTRs revealed differences in their understanding of epistemology. Some 25 researchers (15%) exhibited unfamiliarity with the concept or at least some of the epistemological views we had listed in our survey as prompts. A high number of LTRs admitted that they did not or do not consider their epistemological orientation when conducting their research (36.5%). Finding an interesting question and simply answering it, or developing a model to explain social relationships were seen by these trust scholars as more important than being concerned with epistemological issues. One researcher stated that his work was: '...*much more problem oriented and seeks to integrate theories, perspectives, ideas and questions across fields. As an aside, I would think epistemological choice is not really a 'choice'. People usually 'do' as they are trained'* (LTR 98). Training at university was mentioned 21 times as a key influential factor determining how our respondents thought about epistemology. One of our respondents claimed that epistemology was not a prerequisite for doing research. *'Sociologists in this country* [USA] *base their work on theoretical frameworks, not epistemological approaches.'* (LTR 88).

The most common orientation overall was positivism, 33.5% of respondents stating that they were following a positivist epistemology (Table 1) while 36.5% of the respondents claimed not to have followed or not to follow any particular epistemology. If we exclude the latter respondents, the dominance of positivism (52.8%) is clearly visible. By contrast, the overall representation of other epistemologies and associated philosophies, especially interpretivism and post-structuralism/postmodernism, is relatively low.

[Ideal place for Table 1]

Our analysis confirms significant geographical differences in LTRs' epistemological orientations. There is a significant association between the location of the researcher and her/his holding a particular epistemological view ($\chi2$ (*d.f. 2*) = 7.556, N = 167, *p* = 0.023). Over two-fifths of respondents from North America stated they did not have an epistemological view, much more than in other parts of the world. Those who subscribe to any view in North America tend to follow a positivist epistemology. Although less prevalent, a positivist epistemology was also the most frequent amongst European LTRs, with only a quarter of European LTRs stating they did not adopt any epistemology. Two epistemologies (interpretivism and post-structuralism/post modernism) are entirely absent outside Europe. Further analysis did not reveal any statistically significant association between our respondents' epistemological orientation and factors such as gender, the year of the publication of the relevant article, or potential influential factors such as the subject in which the researcher had received his/her highest academic qualification.

Despite over a third of LTRs claiming they did not have a particular epistemological view, many actually described one in their response, the majority of such cases outlining positivism. For those who chose to offer one they felt most comfortable with, this was also typically positivism. One respondent noted: '...*I must admit I don't think of myself as having an epistemology, I just do research. But looking at your list I would say I am a positivist and that this paper was done in that frame'* (LTR 74).

Our data offer two key insights regarding positivist orientations among LTRs. Firstly, there was a degree of reflexivity among our positivist respondents, some mentioning explicitly the strengths and limitations of positivism and the utility of incorporating multiple approaches. Secondly, this reflexivity seemed to imply a degree of pluralism in this group. For instance, one respondent stated he *'...do[es] not adhere to a strict doctrine of Positivism'* (LTR 8). Another, expressing respect towards other epistemological views, claimed he *'...recognise[s] there are other viable ways to learn and understand'* (LTR 1); and yet another one added: *'...I also recognize the value of the other approaches you list for illuminating rich and valuable ways of thinking about trust and the role it plays in social and cultural life'* (LTR 5). Through subsequent email correspondence new terms were offered by respondents to describe such positions, for example 'flexible positivism' or 'soft positivism'. Recognition, respect and openness towards other approaches were frequently mentioned by this group of respondents.

Our data raise the question of whether there are any signs of epistemological pluralism becoming more acceptable for some, specifically North American, trust researchers. For some LTRs, selecting only one of the major philosophies to reflect their epistemological view seemed inappropriate: *'...Strict adherence to one philosophy is where social science goes wrong sometimes, I think. Strict adherence constrains and tracks social scientists to think inside, rather than outside the box. Adherence is particularly constraining to interdisciplinary research, which requires a good deal of give and take'* (LTR 98). A minority of LTRs claimed that their research uses a combination of epistemologies (Table 1); whilst others, who expressed an affinity with a particular epistemology, wrote also of their growing appreciation of other perspectives: *'...I enjoy the freedom of looking at different phenomena through several different lenses, and although most of my published work has a strong positivist flavour, I have a much more qualitative appreciation of the world than before'* (LTR 22). Another LTR positivist noted: *'...I am not adamantly tied to any perspective as the "only" way. I think we can gain more knowledge from appreciating different approaches to the same problems'* (LTR 86).

In addition to those pluralist LTRs who had adopted 'some form of combination' of epistemological views in their most cited article (Table 1), others had utilized multiple perspectives by adopting different epistemologies for different research projects. 7.8% of the respondents claim to have changed their epistemological approach since they had published their most highly cited article selected for our research. If we take into consideration only those LTRs who explicitly adhere to a particular epistemological view, this percentage increases to 10.4% (11 of 106 scholars).

A number of LTRs also mentioned influences during their development in relation to their philosophical choices such as training, significant other people (i.e. colleagues) and sometimes a family member: *'...My father was a research scientist & engineer, so I was raised to think as a positivist'* (LTR 1). Some LTRs stressed the influence of processes such as publication on their epistemological choices. One mentioned the restriction on the choices he made *'because of the restrictions I feel from positivists (both myself and potential reviewers)'* (LTR 25). Yet among the influences on LTR's epistemological orientations, one of the most poignant issues was perhaps that (implicit) positivism may simply be the result of unquestioningly belonging to the (positivist) mainstream, and a lack of epistemological awareness:

> *'I guess I don't think of myself has having an epistemology because I swim in the mainstream and so remain blissfully unaware of the discussion around most of these other ways of thinking'* (LTR 74).

This is illustrative of how many LTRs, particularly those with positivist views, report that they do not to think about epistemology at all unless they are asked about it as was the case in the context of our empirical study. By contrast, LTRs with a non-positivist epistemology were more likely to have thought about their epistemology, explaining both their own views and how these related to those of others. Some claimed to recognise the value of epistemological pluralism. For instance, a pragmatist noted: '[I] *am sympathetic to 'postmodern' analyses, too, especially in my reviews of other papers'*, also adding: *'I do not use it in my own work'* (LTR 143). Others gave more partisan responses, being dismissive of alternative epistemologies. For example, one LTR described himself as *'a card carrying member of "critical realism" crew, [...] since [...] I took a critical stand against positivism and structural-functionalism'* (LTR 60). Another, who *'didn't come from any particular epistemological perspective'* but had read widely, argued:

> *'Postmodernism is a language I do not understand. It is designed to show people that you can confuse them with obscure language.'* (LTR 110).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Above all, our data highlight that not all LTRs actively think about and question their own or others' epistemological views and the associated assumptions. We found that a minority of LTRs were simply unfamiliar with the concept of epistemology, whilst those who claimed not to follow a particular epistemology often implicitly oriented themselves to a positivist approach.

North American LTRs, who are recognised as dominating the research field, often hold positivist epistemological views. This reflects the current epistemological geography of social sciences in general and of individual social studies fields that contribute to trust research, such as organization studies (Üsdiken 2010). Whilst 'unificationists' (Knudsen 2003), including those expressing such views amongst LTRs, may argue that unifying any research field under a single paradigm is not only desirable but a necessary condition for scientific progress and field maturity (Pfeffer 1993, 1995), we would argue that such an epistemological condition may be seen as problematic and inadequate given the large variety of disciplines and countries that belong to the trust research community. Relying heavily on a single epistemology's research assumptions may result in limited research innovation and creativity, missing the richness and complexity of trust and ignoring, for example, the specific historical circumstances and cultural factors which shape different forms of trust in different situations (Bachmann 2011).

To make sense of the complex phenomenon of trust, researchers need to be aware of and have better knowledge about the full range of co-existing epistemological views rather than just the dominant view. Acknowledging Li's (2011) call to methodological openness, we argue that an active consideration of alternative epistemological orientations, undertaken with an open mind and critical reflection on mainstream epistemological practices, should lie at the heart of our community. Although LTRs, including some of those self-identifying with positivism, often claim to be open to alternative epistemological views, the lack of importance placed upon epistemology among our respondents (with over a third claiming not to have adopted an epistemological view at all) leads us to question the extent to which this is truly possible. Limited epistemological awareness also constrains the making of and reflection on methodological choices, the relationship between theory and practice, and other issues dependent on research philosophy. Following from Li (2011), this is likely to prevent trust researchers from always using the options and techniques best suited for specific research questions, limit the development of theory, and means our research will not contribute as fully

as possible where urgent problems, for example alarmingly low levels of organizational and societal trust (Edelman, 2015), need to be addressed.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of trust research, we contend that the pluralist argument that epistemological diversity is necessary to enrich research fields (Knudsen 2003) is particularly resonant for our field. Möllering's (2013) call for trust research to be theoretically more open, collaborative and integrative also concerns such epistemological issues. Trust research has arrived at a point where we now can and should take on more complexity than in the past. While it may be useful in the early stages of establishing a new research field to define, for example, some basic categories and, for heuristic reasons, hold back sophisticated meta-theoretical reflection for a while, we are now beyond this stage within the trust research community and should consider all our options to gain a more nuanced and historically reflective and culturally sensitive understanding of the phenomenon of trust within the social world which we inhabit. One of our respondents points to the same conclusion: *'...Much of the worst damage done in this world has been the result of a good thought held dogmatically. Thus, we should study epistemology to help us do what we do better being informed by all schools of thought. As with food, I find one spice used all of the time destroys our sense of taste'* (LTR 83*).*

Our analysis provides an overview of epistemological perspectives that are prevalent in our research community. However additionally, we also have a 'critical research interest' (Habermas 1967) and adhere to the idea that research should and indeed always does have a purpose. We wanted to explore underlying assumptions of research work in our field of study because we think that our community can benefit significantly from a better understanding of its own activities. With such a reflexive impetus we wanted to contribute to the overcoming of limitations that currently hold us back in further developing our research and shaping the agenda for our future work.

Our study indicates that, alongside the dominant positivist epistemology, we have a modest base of prominent trust researchers with critical realist, pragmatist and to a lesser extent interpretivist epistemological views. Whilst assurances of anonymity prevent us from revealing specific LTRs or citing their specific research papers in this context, we now consider what each non-positivist epistemology can offer. These are summarised, along with the positivist epistemological view, in Table 2. Critical realist LTRs in both Europe and North America have already contributed to trust research, particularly through their analysis of societal and organisational structures that enable and facilitate trust. Research from this epistemological vantage point could bring new insights into the structural causes and antecedents of trust and distrust, particularly as approached through retroductive, historical analysis of the generative mechanisms that have produced existing relationships. Pragmatist LTRs in our study are, with one exception, based in North America. In focussing upon seeking useful knowledge that will enable successful action through solutions, pragmatist epistemology speaks to the need for trust research that is practically relevant to those in the practitioner community whilst maintaining methodological rigour (Li, 2011). As part of contributing to the wider rigour-relevance debate within management and the social sciences and differences between practitioner and researcher orientations to this debate (Saunders, 2011), we believe that pragmatist trust research can offer timely, useable knowledge that will have a practicable impact from an organisational perspective (Bijlsma-Frankema and Rousseau, 2015). Moreover, as both critical realism and pragmatism embrace a variety of data types and methods, scholars working within these epistemologies can help to foster methodological diversity in trust research, going some way in addressing Li's (2011) call for more methodological openness.

[Ideal place for Table 2]

Fewer in number than either critical realists or pragmatists, interpretivist LTRs are based predominantly within Europe. Emphasising complexity and a diversity of interpretations needed to develop new understandings, interpretivist trust research highlights the importance of context sensitive, often comparative, approaches. Noting the complexity of trust processes, interpretivist LTRs have contributed by offering specific insights and explanations as to why trust develops. Such insights are important and will continue to be important to understanding the complex phenomenon of trust in terms of establishing what people actually mean when they say that they trust or distrust each other. Adopting an interpretivist epistemology can help bring light into such complex 'life-worlds' (Habermas, 1967) that may be dominated by discourse that privilege some people as trustworthy (e.g., high income earners in permanent positions) and others as categorically untrustworthy (e.g., temporary manual workers of a certain ethnic background). These insights can be transferred to other contexts as well as being explored and verified by using alternative methods (Clases et al., 2003).

By contrast, our study showed that the trust field is currently lacking in postmodernist/poststructuralist research, with only one responding LTR identifying himself as such. Offering an examination of the role of dominant ideologies and discourses and seeking to challenge these, research from a postmodernist/poststructuralist epistemological view presents a clear opportunity for developing and enriching our field. Postmodernist trust research would focus on deconstructing discourses of trust, examining what counts as trust and distrust within particular socio-political and cultural epochs and contexts. It would examine specific power relations that constitute and sustain discourses of trust, and question their implications. In doing so, it would also critically consider what is silenced, marginalised and excluded by the dominant trust discourses, thus making visible the dark side within the complexities of trust (Skinner et al., 2014). With its emphasis on radical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2003), postmodern research could be highly instrumental in addressing the need for greater researcher self-awareness, including the epistemological awareness, our study has shown to be limited among trust researchers.

Recent debate in the *Journal of Trust Research* has questioned whether trust can best be described by universalistic models and definitions (contrast Bachmann, 2011 and Dietz, 2011). Whilst it is not the purpose of this piece to reiterate this debate in full, we note that many of the highest cited articles in our field appear tacitly based on exactly such etic premises allowing for virtually no 'context-sensitivity' (Bachmann 2010) in their concepts and their frameworks. This appears to be the result of the positivist epistemology, explicitly and sometimes implicitly prevailing in our field of research. Positivist research has undoubtedly contributed greatly to our understanding of trust and we note, as an illustration, the considerable utility of widely accepted categories and differentiations such as Mayer et al.'s (1995) ABI model or Lewicki and Bunker's (1995) model of trust in relationships. However, we need to also allow ourselves alternative views and more critical depth if we want our field to develop and generate innovative and practically meaningful results, both in the academic world and in practitioners' domains. This requires epistemological pluralism. If trust does not just exist but is a social process (Möllering, 2013), we would contend that its nature can be viewed in many different ways.

The discussion we want to initiate with this contribution has of course relevance for the social sciences as a whole. Our field of trust research with its wide disciplinary scope seems very suitable for a new attempt to engage in epistemological reflections that are needed more than ever. Too much of our current research output is solely geared to complying with formal

processes, such as being published in 'highly ranked' journals. Too little of our research tries to answer academically important questions which are relevant and urgent from the perspective of diverse stakeholder groups, especially the need of management practitioners (see the interview with Robert Hurley by Don Ferrin in this issue). We should have the courage and/or intellectual ambition to seriously reflect on what we are doing and why we are doing it. Trust research could lead the way and inspire other fields of social research if we inject more reflexivity in our debates and reject a culture of avoiding critical questions about our own and others epistemological views. Acknowledging the emphasis on a plurality of views by the *Journal of Trust Research* editors, we encourage other editors to do likewise. Yet, for true epistemological reflection to actually happen, as a research community we need to start to actively think about and debate our, often tacit, epistemological assumptions. In our field of trust, new and relevant research questions will increasingly require a good deal of meta-theoretical reflexivity to better understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. This will apply to us all as individual researchers whether we '*swim in the mainstream*' or explore the many tributaries of trust research.

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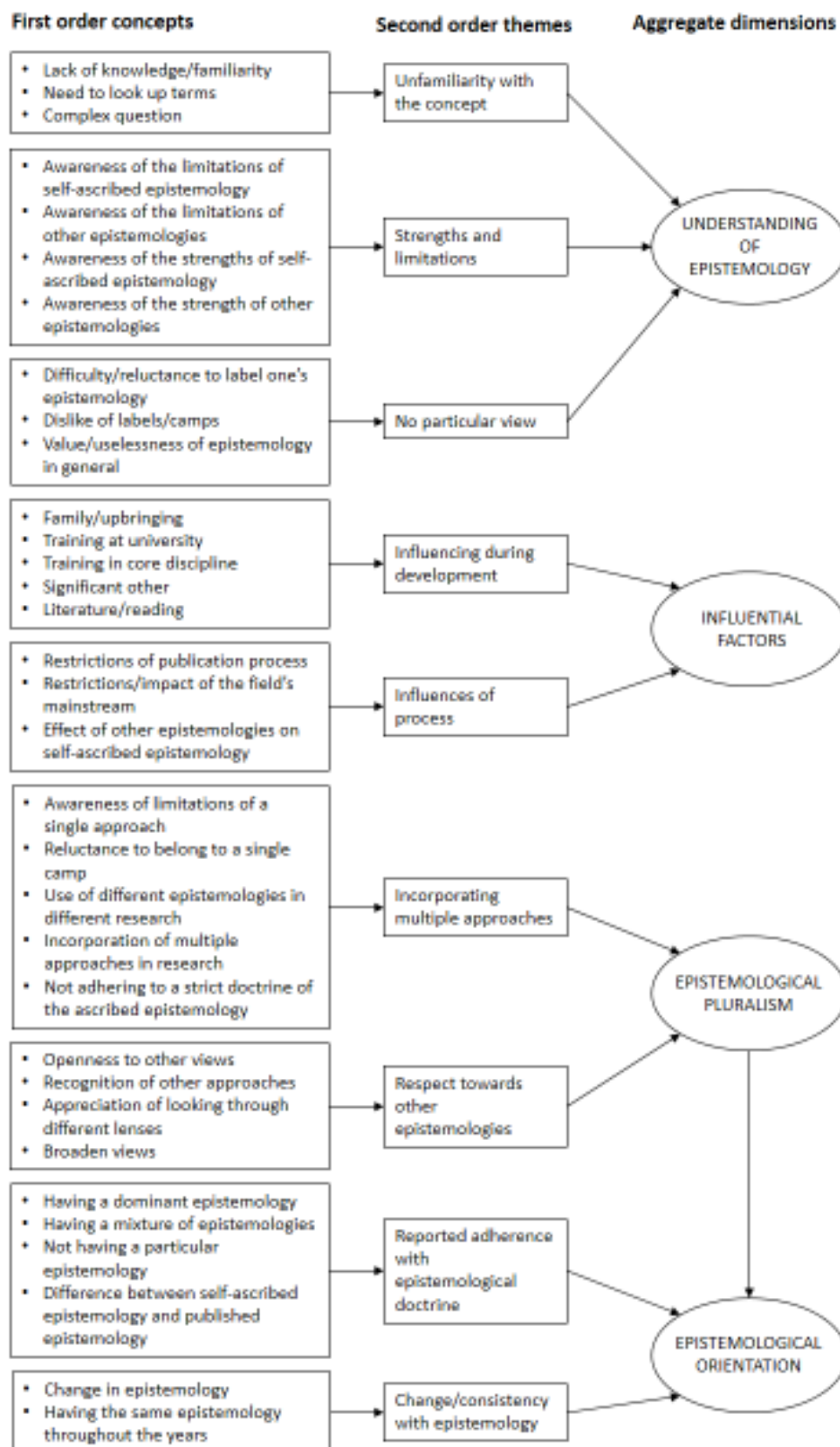
Figure 1. Data Structure

Table 1: Epistemological Views of Leading Trust Researchers by Geographical Area

Epistemological view	Percentage of Leading Trust Researchers				
	North America	Europe	Other	All	All (excluding none adopted)
Positivism	33.3	28.6	54.5	33.5	52.8
Critical realism	5.3	11.9	9.1	7.2	11.3
Pragmatism	9.6	2.4	0	7.2	11.3
Interpretivism	0	9.5	0	2.4	3.8
Post-structuralism/ Postmodernism	0	2.6	0	0.6	0.9
Some form of combination	4.4	9.5	27.3	7.2	11.3
Other	4.4	9.5	0	5.4	8.5
None adopted	43.0	26.2	9.1	36.5	-
Total (=100%)	114	42	11	167	106

Table 2: Epistemologies, Beliefs about Knowledge and Acceptable Knowledge, and the Implications for Trust Research

Epistemology	Beliefs about knowledge and what constitutes acceptable knowledge	Implications of epistemology for trust research
Positivism	• There is single, universal truth • Knowledge should be objective • Knowledge should be based on observable, measurable facts and causal relationships	• Produces law-like generalisations and causal explanations • Predicts behaviours
Critical realism	• Knowledge of social facts and physical facts should be approached differently • Researchers can use a variety of data and methods Researchers should be as objective as possible	• Contributes retroductive, historical explanatory analyses • Offers insights into structures, structural causes and antecedents • Fosters methodological diversity
Pragmatism	• Knowledge should be practically relevant and useful • Research should provide solutions and inform practice • Researchers can use a variety of data and methods •	• Contributes timely knowledge • Enables successful action in practice • Fosters methodological diversity
Interpretivism	• Knowledge is subjective and shaped by context • Theories and concepts are too simplistic to represent full richness • Researchers should seek a diversity of experiences, interpretations and narratives	• Focuses on meaning • Embraces complexity • Offers subjective, diverse, context sensitive understandings
Post-structuralism/ **Postmodernism**	• 'Knowledge' and 'truth' are decided by dominant ideologies and discourses • Researchers should be deconstructive of power relations • Researchers should be radically reflexive	• Examines and challenges dominant discourses • Makes visible the dark side and gives voice to what is silenced • Fosters reflexivity