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Secrets, Trust, and Transparency

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Secrets, trust, and transparency: Navigating between influence and accountability as trusted intermediary.

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Abstract

Secrecy is usually considered a destructive to trust. However, people are often involved in conflicting social commitments, where transparency to one trustor may violate the trust of others. Georg Simmel suggests that secrecy can serve important social purposes and consequently, strategically balancing transparency and secrecy can be conducive to social cooperation and building intersubjective trust. This is particularly the case for trusted intermediaries tasked with building trust in multiple, conflicting relations. In this paper, we investigate how shop stewards actively navigate the transparency–secrecy nexus as trusted intermediaries to build trust and gain maximal influence over management decisions. The study is based on qualitative interviews with 29 shop stewards within the Danish care sector. Shop stewards depend on co-worker trust and transparency, whereas their influence on management requires secrecy and trust, which make shop stewards vulnerable to criticism and mistrust from their co-workers. This study shows that transparency and secrecy are important trust work tools for creating and maintaining trust. However, it also suggests that this require efficient compartmentalisation of issues, roles and contextual meaning in separate formal and informal spaces of collaboration with management, to avoid co-worker suspicion or conflict with management.

Keywords: Trust, organization, secrets and secrecy, shop steward, industrial relations, transparency, trust work, trust intermediaries

Introduction

Trust research often employ concepts such as transparency (Casati, 2010; Sztompka, 1998) (Rawlins, 2008) (Han, 2020) (Giddens, 1991) (Seligman, 1997), signalling (Sliwka, 2007) (Clifford & Gaskins, 2016) (Hamill & Gambetta, 2006), or accountability (De Cremer, Snyder, & Dewitte, 2001) (Calnan & Rowe, 2008) (Corderly & Baskerville, 2011) to describe the importance to trustors of available information about a potential trustee (Frey, 2017). Trust is conceived of as dependent on interpretation of information (Houser, Schunk, & Winter, 2010) (Möllering, 2001), a conceptualization which may suggest that more transparency is always more conducive to trust than trustees withholding information (Frey, 2017) (Coleman, 1982) (Hardin, 2004). However, the level of transparency in one relationship may often depend on commitments in other relationships. In many cases, trust takes place within networks of social relations with different kinds of hierarchical structures, different formal and informal commitments and different – even contradictory – interests and purposes (Whelan, 2016) (Igarashi et al., 2008) (Lusher, Robins, Pattison, & Lomi, 2012) (Lusher, Kremer, & Robins, 2014). These may constrain a trustee's ability to be transparent and compel them to withhold information in a particular relationship: to keep secrets. Since trust is often theorized in the context of a single relationship, whether intersubjective, interorganizational or institutional or as a general aspect of networks (Lusher et al., 2014) (Jones & Shah, 2021) (Herzog & Yang, 2018) (Karhunen, Kosonen, McCarthy, & Puffer, 2018), we have only a limited understanding of how people balance transparency and secrecy between different social commitments to build trust. In this paper we seek to understand the role played by transparency and secrecy in trust building. We investigate the trust work performed by shop stewards strategically using both secrecy and transparency to become trusted

intermediaries (Troath, 2021), maintaining trust within multiple, conflicting relationships.

Grounded in Georg Simmel's (1950) work on trust as closely related to secrecy, we conceive of trust as partly grounded in a purposeful use of secrecy and transparency which allows the trusted intermediary to build trust within multiple, partly incompatible relational commitments. We show that information selection may play a key role both in trust building and maintaining incompatible trust relationships simultaneously. The findings of this paper are relevant both to similar institutionalized trusted intermediaries such as diplomats, negotiators and other emissaries, but also speaks more generally to precarious balance between transparency and secrecy involved in any trust relation.

This theory developing case study is based on an interview study of 29 shop stewards in the Danish care sector. Shop stewards build and maintain trust with both co-workers and management despite the manifest, conflicting interests of these. Building trust in one relationship may reduce shop steward trustworthiness in the other relationship. Consequently, shop stewards continuously carry out trust work, balancing transparency and secrecy within and between relationships to co-workers and management to become trusted intermediaries.

Our analysis seeks to answer the following research question:

How do shop stewards balance transparency and secrecy in the relationships to co-workers and management to maintain their role as trusted intermediaries?

In the following section, we connect to current theorizing on the relationship between trust, transparency, and secrecy and we investigate the role of trusted intermediaries. In doing so, we take Simmel's work on this topic as our point of departure. Secondly, we present the methodology, case and interview data used for this study. Thirdly, findings are presented, investigating the shop stewards' role as trusted intermediary and the trust work they use for balancing these two relationships. Finally, we discuss the implications of this study for trust research.

Theoretical framework

Trust and information

In this paper, we follow Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998:398) in defining trust as ‘a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another’. This definition is relevant in the context of secrecy, because it emphasises the mutuality of trust in terms of vulnerability and the possibility of exploitation (Mistzal, 2011; Sabel, 1993). Trust is based on both the trustor’s pre-existing dispositions and specific situational contexts (Luhmann, 1979, Möllering 2006), and, as a relationship develops, the foundation of trust may also change from risk calculation to experience or mutual identification (Kramer, 1999). Trust additionally depend on the institutional context to work as guarantor of interpersonal trust (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). Coleman, 1990; Zucker, 1986). In some cases, institutionalizations may foster interpersonal trust (Bachman and Inkpen 2001), and, in others, they become surrogates for interpersonal trust (Curry, 2011; Kramer, 1999). In these theories, trust involves information about both the trustee and relevant institutions. While trust does not depend on knowledge alone (Simmel, 1950; Möllering 2001) knowledge and information about trustees play an important role in building trust and assessing trustworthiness (Hardin, 2004) (Cook, 2001). So far, we have little knowledge of how trustees actively influence the information available about them to trustors – what we in this paper terms trust work. In the following section, we theoretically frame this issue by connecting trust theory to theories of secrecy and transparency.

The secrecy-transparency nexus

Trust is famously argued by Georg Simmel (1950) to build on ‘weak inductive knowledge’ and to conceptually belong somewhere between certainty and ignorance. This question of when knowledge is sufficient for a trustor to accept vulnerability has been one of the mainstays of trust research within rational (Coleman 1990, Hardin 2006), institutional (Zucker 1986), interactionist (Garfinkel, 1963; Möllering, 2006), and phenomenological approaches (Brownlie & Howson, 2005; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). However, Simmel’s purpose to investigate trust was not to understand trust but rather to understand secrecy,

indicating a somewhat different approach to the issue of sufficient knowledge. To Simmel sufficient knowledge meant the right amount of knowledge suggesting that there is both a threshold of too much information as well as a threshold of too little information. This is what Ringel (2019) terms the secrecy-transparency nexus.

Simmel argued, that withholding information relevant to a situation may, in some cases, be perceived as lying, but in many cases more information may be misleading or unnecessary for a specific relationship. Transparency may, in fact, unnecessarily undermine trust in some cases.

We must [however] take care not to be misled, by the ethically negative value of lying, into error about the direct positive sociological significance of untruthfulness, as it appears in shaping certain concrete situations.
(Simmel 1906:448)

The purposeful withholding of information may facilitate social interaction by not creating unnecessary distractions or suspicion, which helps to build trust. Simmel's argument is, counter-intuitively, that trust often requires information to be excluded by dissimulation. Due to the inductive nature of trust, too much information and transparency may impede trust-building even if the trustee is, in fact, trustworthy (Frederiksen, 2014a). Complete transparency can in some situations increase trust, because people who knows something with complete certainty have no need for trust, as Simmels (1950) argues. However, in most cases, it is impossible as a trustor to know whether you have full information or not, because of the invisibility of secrecy. Simmel (1950:318) further discuss whether 'faith of man in man' may be a component of trust beyond the issue of information and knowledge, but this is outside the scope of this paper.

Transparency within organizations has been an important topic of research (Ringel, 2019; Vattimo & Webb, 1992) and has largely been considered a powerful, legitimate tool for eliminating illegitimate and disruptive secrecy (Hood, 2007). Transparency aims to make hidden knowledge visible and verifiable to both internal and external audiences (Albu & Flyverbom, 2019). From the perspective of transparency, withholding information from a would-be trustor is a type of deception upon which trust can only be built spuriously, and

trust is essentially misplaced on such occasions. This approach fails to heed Simmel's warning about conflating lies with untruthfulness. Secrecy is a phenomenon that extends beyond a purely ethical dimension, and the normative preference for transparency prevents us from investigating other aspects of secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2014).

In the context of information and (in-)transparency, secrecy is a concept closely related to the concepts of privacy and confidentiality. However, privacy is informal and morally justified to both those who share privacy and those who respect privacy of others. Secrecy, in contrast, is only justified to those who share the secrecy while unknown and potentially illegitimate to those who are not privy to the secrets (Bok, 1985; Goffman, 2002). Confidentiality relies on general principles and institutions justifying that specific information is confidential regardless of what participants and outsiders consider justified (Costas and Gray 2014). This is characteristic of, for example, doctor/patient confidentiality or confidential information linked to national security, and requires a pre-existing trust in the institutions that legitimize the confidentiality.

Forms and purposes of secrecy

Secrecy does not rest on overarching principles or institutionalized rules but on what those sharing the secret can agree on and, consequently, it has no external legitimation (Bok, 1985; Casati, 2010; Costas & Grey, 2014; Neitzke, 2007). In many cases, secrecy serves important and legitimate informational purposes in terms of managing knowledge and impressions of those who are not privy to the secrets (Costas & Grey, 2014; Dufresne & Offstein, 2008; Luhmann, 1989). In fact, secrecy and transparency can be conceived as a duality where one is always produced along with the other (Parker, 2016:110).

This duality is evident in much of the scarce literature on secrets. Finkenauer and Hazam (2000) find that, in marriages, complete candour is never achieved because secrecy performs important functions even within high-trust relations. While a high level of secrecy may have a detrimental effect on a marriage, using secrecy to keep conflict levels low has a positive effect. In the context of political parties, Ringel (2019) shows the complexity of the secrecy-transparency nexus and the need to develop backstage, secrecy strategies to handle the adverse

effects on trust of frontstage transparency, a balance that involves managing the potential illegitimacy of secrecy. Bok (1985) identifies a similarly precarious balance in the context of nuclear disarmament, arguing that transparency is conducive to trust, whereas secrecy disables criticism and judgment. However, transparency in international relations comes at the price of reduced legitimacy and the appearance of weakness to the domestic public reducing the space for compromise in negotiations. Among illegal and clandestine organizations (Stohl & Stohl, 2011), the same balance between frontstage and backstage – transparency and secrecy – serves an important role in the strategic management of communication and impressions to maintain multiple, different and conflicting identities. Based on existing research, trust seems to depend on maintaining the right balance between secrecy and transparency when no institutional context provides guides for this balance. In this paper we conceive of this balancing as a part of actively building trust (Möllering XXXX) through trust work.

Secrets have other important social aspects beyond the management of information. Simmel's notion of untruthfulness points to all the instances where withholding information helps trustors and trustees obtain common goals and maintain cooperation rather than help the trustor deceive the trustee. Secrets may be 'strategic secrets', where valuable information is kept from others, or they may 'dark secrets', where compromising information is kept from others Goffman (2002). Once shared with others, however, withheld information becomes shared secrets, which are powerful vehicles for trust-building and strengthening social relations:

Corresponding with this protective character of the secret society, as an external quality, is [...] the inner quality of reciprocal confidence between the members. This is, moreover, a quite specific type of confidence, viz., in the ability to preserve silence. (Simmel 1906:472)

Those who share secrecy have implied trust in each other, and secrecy may create an affirmational group identity. Goffman (2002) classifies this as 'inside secrets', and Simmel claims that secrecy as a social form both concerns the informational substance of the secret and the reciprocal affirmation of keeping

the secret. A secret may bestow control on those privy to it because they control information and, thus, actions and perceptions of those who are not. Secrecy also exerts control over those privy to the secret, binding them to it and to those with whom they share the secret (Luhmann 1989, Bok 1985, Costas and Grey 2014). Despite any other outside inequalities and asymmetries among those who share a secret, secrecy creates equality both in terms of the shared secret and the shared vulnerability to a potential breach of secrecy (Luhmann 1989, Simmel 1950). Sharing secrecy requires that participants make themselves vulnerable to each other and, consequently, trust each other. This shared bond of vulnerability introduces an affective aspect of trust and secrecy that enables participants to be creative and explorative, transcending the boundaries set by more transparent forms of interaction (Barbalet, 2009; Bok, 1985; Simmel, 1950). Trust enables explorative collaboration, while secrecy suspends the role of external judgement, making for a powerful combination.

Trusted intermediaries

Trust is often intertwined with relational networks, a fact that has been conceptualised as both the network transitivity trust and social capital (Lin, 2001) (Tilly, 2007). Generally this approach is based on the assumption that trust is not a depletable resource and trusting one person or group does not restrain trusting others. However, in conflicted network relations, strengthening on set of social commitments may have detrimental effects on other social commitments (Elias & Scotson, 1994). This is a key element in research on the dark side of social capital: building strong communities often also mean building strongly excluding communities (Putnam, R. D., 2000) (Putnam, Robert D., 1993) (Portes, 1998). In the context of information and transparency, this is equally important. If information has the character of strategic, inside or dark secrets, keeping those secrets will affirm trust and divulging it to outsiders will betray trust. This puts people in intermediary roles in a predicament: if trust depend on inside transparency and outside secrecy in a relationship, a piece of information relevant in two opposing relationships becomes a threat to trust in both. Research has examined trust in intermediaries who act as representatives, surrogates or specialist controllers of the trustworthiness of a person, system or

organizations otherwise difficult to trust (Khodyakov, 2007) (Trapido, 2019) (Rüdiger & Rodríguez, 2013) (Ritzer-Angerer, 2018). Trust intermediaries, however, usually only deal with one, outside trustor. *Trusted* intermediaries, in our conception, are trustees who need to build and maintain trust with two separate trustors who do not trust each other. To trusted intermediaries, trust based exclusively on transparency may be a zero sum game, because increasing transparency in one relationship, comes at the cost of reduced secrecy in the other. In some cases, formal institutional framing will help striking the correct balance between secrecy and transparency in the two relations by defining areas of confidentiality, but even in those cases, trusted intermediaries often have room for discretion. Street-level bureaucracy research, eg show how people who are formally trust intermediaries may choose to act as trusted intermediaries, expanding their room for discretion and transparency beyond the formal bounds (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022) (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2021). Balanced transparency and secrecy within and between two relationships, is a key part of the trust work of trusted intermediaries.

Analytical framework

In our empirical investigation we combine the above insights to an analytical framework which focus on the transparency/secrecy nexus as a duality which involves both an internal and external information selection strategy in any trust relation. Selecting an appropriate level of transparency also means selecting an appropriate level of secrecy. Trustees employ different information selection strategies as part of ongoing trust work. However, in the context of trusted intermediaries, the trust/secrecy duality spans mutually exclusive commitments: transparency within one relationship may require intransparency in the other relationship, turning transparency into shared secrecy. Finally, institutional and situational context define when and where specific types of secrecy and transparency are meaningful and allow trusted intermediaries to strike different balances between secrecy and transparency in different institutional and situational contexts.

Methodology

Case and case selection

We investigate Danish public sector shop stewards as a case of trust work involving transparency and secrecy. The case study aim to develop theory on the interconnections between trust, secrecy and transparency in the context of trusted intermediaries. To investigate trust in the context of secrecy and transparency, a case is required where 1. trust is not trivial, but is both important and require some effort to maintain and 2. where secrecy and transparency are important, non-trivial elements in building trust with more than one trustor.

Danish shop stewards are literally called 'trust representatives' [Tillidsrepræsentant] in Danish and occupy a key position in Danish workplaces. In most cases, shop stewards continue performing their regular job, but spend some of their working hours performing the role of shop steward (Jensen, 2012).

National collective agreement frameworks increasingly require shop stewards and managers to engage in continuous negotiations (Jensen 2012), and an increasing number of issues have been decentralised to workplace negotiations since the 1940s (Due & Madsen 2006). As a result, the shop steward is the fulcrum of employer/employee relations in the Danish labourmarket.

Shop stewards are elected among the union organized employees within the organization and are up for election at regular intervals. Once elected they usually receive union training. They represent the employee side within formal workplace institutions and negotiations, in particular within the work council (MED), which is formally institutionalized in collective agreements at the national level. In the work council are negotiated procedures and agreements relating to work safety, employee education, workplace policies etc. Management are required to inform about decisions which influence employee interests in the work council. Shop stewards are also involved in or represent individual employees in cases, such as salary negotiations, dismissals or formal warnings. Furthermore, they advise employees on workplace issues related to their contract, salary, work place safety etc. Information related to cases about individual employees are confidential, whereas more general information about employee interests and motives are not.

In regards to the first case selection requirement, existing research suggests that trust is critically important to the work of Danish shop stewards (Hansen 2013). Trust between management and shop stewards has been shown to lead to more extensive local agreements (Ilsøe 2010). Moreover, trust is an integral part of national-level negotiations between employer and employee organizations (Due & Madsen, 1996; 2006), and the requirement for local, ongoing formal interactions between shop stewards and managers is conducive to trust-building (Hansen 2013). Within industrial relations research, a distinction is made between distributive and integrative bargaining (Walton and McKersie 1965). Distributive bargaining describes situations where one party achieves results at the expense of the other. Integrative bargaining, in contrast, refers to situations where a mutually beneficial agreement is reached. The Danish context is characterized by a tendency for employer and employees to search for integrative bargaining solutions rather than direct conflict and distributive bargaining (Due & Madsen, 1996; Jensen, 2012), making the need for trust between management and shop stewards more pressing in Denmark than in countries with a distributive bargaining tradition.

In regards to the second requirement, shop stewards role as trusted intermediaries require that they continuously manage transparency and secrecy (Hansen 2013). Shop stewards are elected employee representatives which require that they maintain trust and transparency with their co-workers, while they also need to build and maintain trust in their collaboration with management to be efficient and gain influence (Hansen, 2013). While this is often the case in any negotiation, shop stewards need to build more long-term relationships and a higher level of trust than in most other comparable cases. This trust work dilemma of trusted intermediaries, is relevant to a larger group of cases of eg negotiators, diplomats, envoys and representatives that are characterised by a permanent conflict between the demand for transparency from the people they represent and a need for secrecy from the people with whom they negotiate and collaborate. The shop steward case allow us to theorize on social forces at work in this complex relationship and propose conceptualizations relevant to this larger family of cases (Walton, 1992). Furthermore, building on Simmels discussion of secrecy and trust, the

theoretical contribution developed from our case study may be relevant beyond this narrow class of cases to the more general issue of managing transparency in and between trust relationships.

Data collection

Twenty-nine shop stewards in the Danish public care sector, which is organized by the trade union FOA (Fag og Arbejde - Trade and Labour), were interviewed. The FOA primarily organizes public sector employees in the care sector, and it is the third-largest trade union in Denmark. The interviewees were selected within 7 local chapters of FOA and represent only the organisations within the care sector: health care, child care, and elderly care. The 7 chapters were from different geographical location and degrees of urbanisation. The interviewees are completely anonymised due to the precarious role of shop stewards, but the demographic composition generally reflect that of the union organized employees in the sector: predominantly female, middleaged and with short term professional training. The interviews where conducted as loosely structured qualitative interviews, allowing themes to emerge in the conversation while maintaining the overall focus of the inquiry. The interviews focused on how trust is a part of the shop stewards' practices and how it becomes important in organizing processes in the workplace. The interviews followed the technique of 'interview to the double' (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2009). When respondents would make general statements or explain their actions with reference to general tendencies or processes in organizations or society, questions regarding their specific situations and actions were asked to link these experiences with the practices involved. The purpose was to ensure descriptions of specific situations and experiences in order to investigate the contextual meaning involved in their handling of transparency and secrecy. The shop stewards were interviewed at their own workplace, and the average duration of the interviews was 45 minutes.

Data analysis

This analysis aimed to answer the research question:

How do shop stewards balance transparency and secrecy in the relationships to co-workers and management to maintain their role as trusted intermediaries?

Specifically, we focused on the trust work of shop stewards: the selection of information to be entrusted or not in specific relations and context, the strategies for appearing and being trustworthy through combinations of transparency and secrecy. In our analysis, we identified trust as it emerges within the accounts of the informants, both in their general reflections on trust and in the anecdotal descriptions. Taking the vulnerability approach to trust (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998:398) as our point of departure, we conducted a first cycle of concept coding (Saldaña, 2021) identifying all instances of information entrusting. We both identified instances where interviewees describe that they entrust information to others or they decided not to entrust information and instances where they were entrusted with information or experienced that others were unwilling to entrust them with information. In the first coding cycle, we also conducted descriptive coding of the institutional and situational context of trust: formally institutionalized or informal fora, co-worker or management, descriptions of the expectations, goals, and commitments associated with the entrusting of information. In the second coding cycle, we identified different reflexions and justification from the interviewees regarding when trust was warranted and when it was not, within the concept coding. From these reflexions and justification we developed a set of patterns codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) to recombine these into meaningful and contextual notions of trust and the entrusting of information within the descriptive code matrix. Finally, we developed a coherent account of trust, secrecy and transparency across these pattern codes to describe the trust work strategies employed by shopstewards in balancing secrecy and transparency between the different relations and contexts.

Findings

In the following we present the analytical findings of our study. First, we describe the way shopstewards manage trust, secrets and transparency in relationship to their co-workers. Secondly, we present the ways shop stewards engage in mutual trust building with management, and finally, we address the

trust work shop stewards carry out to balance transparency and secrecy in the role as trusted intermediaries.

Shop stewards and employees

All shop stewards describe trust as a key component of their relationship with co-workers and pivotal in their job as shop stewards. While a few consider their co-workers' vote a sufficient expression of trust, most shop stewards continuously work to maintain and build trust in two specific ways, combining transparency and secrecy. First, shop stewards build trust by being attentive and responsive to the needs and interests expressed by their co-workers and by observing secrecy and confidentiality in regards to these needs and interests. Secondly, limited forms of transparency are also employed by shop stewards to build co-worker trust.

Attention, confidentiality and secrecy

Most shop stewards emphasise that co-worker trust require continuous work to be sustained. Trust is something built through hard work and by paying attention to your colleagues:

You don't have the trust of your employees just because you got elected, it is something you have to work really hard to have.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 4)

When you take care of the interests of your colleagues, when you have a feel for them, when you are able to chat with them. When you are able to carry the wishes of your colleagues to the management and make something of those wishes in a way that matches the wishes of the management...The most important thing is that you have the trust of your colleagues, since they are the ones who elected you.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 3)

Building and maintaining trust hinges on the shop stewards trust work: showing attentiveness to the needs and concerns of their co-workers and signalling to them that their needs and concerns are protected by secrecy or confidentiality. The information given by individual employees to the shop stewards is institutionally protected and covered by confidentiality, whereas the shop

steward has discretion about keeping other information about the interests and motivations of co-workers secret or not.

To me it is inherent in the word trust. A shop steward (lit.: trust representative) is someone my colleagues can trust: them knowing that when they tell me something I will either act on it or keep to myself. Furthermore that I am there for my colleagues when they need me.
(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 5)

Shop steward work to build co-worker trust by making themselves available, by being attentive and responsive to concerns, by signalling respect for confidentiality and secrecy when called for, and by acting as confidants for their co-workers. It is a typical characterisation that presence, secrecy/confidentiality, and responsiveness are key elements of the trust work required to build and maintain co-worker trust.

Transparency

The above quote also points to the importance of agency as part of shop steward trust work. Most interviewed shop stewards emphasised the importance of a visible presence and communicating about negotiations for building co-worker trust. Co-worker trust depends on an alignment of shop stewards visible actions and negotiations results with the interests and expectations of the employees. Co-worker trust is more grounded in shop stewards communicating results and enacting their trustworthiness as 'good shop stewards' than in transparency regarding the details of the work and negotiations. In their day-to-day work, there is little co-worker interest in transparency and shop stewards negotiate most issues based on an initial consultation with the employees. If negotiations do not concern the immediate work conditions of the employees, attempts at transparency and communicating results are met with disinterest from co-workers. Consequently, transparency is limited, partial, and post-hoc in most cases.

Interviewer [I]: *How do you keep track of your colleagues' thoughts on workplace tendencies and the general development?*

Respondent [R]: *I find that very difficult sometimes, because when I tell them about what I am doing, they look very befuddled. Then I try to tell them some more about my activities and explain, and I can tell that they are thinking 'I would just like to do my work and not have to deal with this, it does not interest me'. My impression is that they don't care about the bigger issues, those that are related to the entire municipality, however those issues are related to their work and workplace and are crucial. That is where the employees really expect you to speak up on their behalf and if the shop steward does not do that, you should not hold the position.*

I: *How do you notice those issues?*

R: *Well I haven't experienced it many times, so I hope that is because I am doing a good job. All you can do is listen to what they say when the results of those negotiations I have been part of are made public. Are they satisfied or do they think it is rubbish?*

I: *And then adjust?*

R: *Yes then you have to begin sowing the seeds that can lead to an adjustment.*

I: *When and how do you use your insight into the perspective of your colleagues?*

R: *It is actually quite often, if I am being completely honest it is often based on my notion of what would be the best result in this concrete situation. Based on the history of the workplace and this specific issue. And, in addition to that, how we are affected by the environment, as you know our trade is very dependent on reforms in the regional authority.*

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 7)

The shop steward in the above quote describes the shop stewards need to be attentive to their co-worker's reactions, maintain updated and precise insight into the perspective of their co-workers, and evaluate their reactions to the outcomes of management negotiations. Even though trust between shop stewards and co-workers rarely hinges on active transparency while negotiations are ongoing, the shop stewards are held accountable for the results

they achieve by co-workers. Shop stewards must be able to explain how they attempted to influence a decision to further co-worker interests.

Contextual meaning

A key point here is the contextual meaning of interest, as is evident in the above quote. Co-workers regard their own interests within a temporal horizon very different from the temporal horizon within negotiations with management. Consequently, they may show disinterest in pivotal parts of negotiations with management, because shop stewards become involved in policy and planning processes that extend well outside immediate employee interests. While such topics may be highly relevant to co-workers, they do not necessarily recognize this importance. This means that their demands for transparency are often partial, and there may outright disinterest in transparency. In such cases, the shop stewards must shift between the contextual meaning of management negotiations and co-worker consultations to reconcile the expressed perspectives of their co-workers with a more long-term perspective of co-workers interest. This is necessary because it is an important part of the shop stewards' work to make management policies align with the long-term interests of the co-workers, even when this is in conflict with their immediate interests.

Trust work in relation to co-workers

Trust between shop stewards and their co-workers hinges on two trust work strategies: 1. the shop stewards attentiveness, responsiveness, and secrecy/confidentiality in their direct relation to co-workers and 2. on limited, often post-hoc transparency in regard to the results of their negotiations with management.

The entrusting of co-worker information to the shop stewards enabled by trust building may entail both dark secrets and strategic secrets in the sense that they may potentially expose employee vulnerabilities or employee interests and strategies (Goffman 2002). Confidentiality is legitimized by formal institutions and poses no threat to employees or shop stewards—regardless of the informational content—as long as the employees trust the shop stewards to respect confidentiality. Other information about co-worker perspective which

the shop steward has discretion to share with management, are secrets with no institutional legitimation. Both secret and confidential information work as inside secrets building bonds of identification between co-workers and shop stewards (Goffman 2002) and reduce co-worker feelings of vulnerability and exposure in entrusting information to the shop steward.

The partial transparency of shop stewards makes only part of their work visible while keeping important parts invisible (Parker 2016, Costas and Grey 2014). The interviewed shop stewards withhold information thought to be unwanted by or simply uninteresting to the co-workers and, consequently, they focused on conveying only the information needed to build and maintain co-worker trust. This is the essence of Simmel's (1950) point that untruthfulness may serve positive social purposes. Shop stewards' choice of partial transparency in building trust is grounded in the contextual meaning of employee interest. The different temporal horizons and scales of employee and management engagement in the work place.

Shop stewards and managers

In Danish workplace negotiations, much interaction between shop stewards and managers takes place in different formally institutionalized settings and fora. Nonetheless, all the interviewed shop stewards emphasized interactions with managers outside formal fora as an important part of their practice:

[About her time as a floor-level shop steward] It had a lot to do with keeping your ear to the ground, listening for what touched the co-workers, the chat in the washing room. Is it something I have to act on. I had many informal conversations with my manager about what was going on right then and there. If she had some idea, that could provide results, I would be told before it was put into motion. So it involves a lot of dialogue and cooperation.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 5)

These ongoing, informal interactions between shop stewards and management give the shop steward access to the management perspective and ideas in the

early stages of management planning and also give them influence on the long-term organizing processes. The shop stewards experience that the informal space of negotiations integrate them into the contextual meaning of managements' long term planning processes.

As suggested in the above quote, informal interactions also give management better access to the employee perspective. Shop stewards draw on their insights into the employees' needs, interests, and motivations to give their managers feedback regarding specific initiatives. This helps managers understand the contextual meaning of employee interests and motivation and adjust strategies and implementation of management policies

Secrecy, trust and vulnerability

This informal exchange of key strategic information between the shop steward and management involves a high level of vulnerability because it has no institutionalized legitimacy and consequently requires both trust and secrecy.

You have to build that trust with the managers – show them I can carry this knowledge and I can handle listening to their thoughts, without passing that information on.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 5)

Managers seek to integrate the shop stewards in planning processes, because shop stewards have access to the ideas, motives, and interests of the employees, which are largely inaccessible to management. This is an alternative avenue of influence for shop stewards, which is of critical importance to both shop stewards and management but carries two important risks for the shop stewards. First, when shop stewards communicate the employee perspective to management in an informal setting, they compromise the confidentiality important to co-worker trust. This means that the secrets shared with management are dark secrets in form if not always in content. Secondly, entrusting secret information, shop stewards and managers, in many cases, develop close, trusting relationships due to the binding effect of inside secrets. To the shop stewards, this is considered a part of doing their job, but their

integration into the management perspective and their close bonds with managers, come at the expense of transparency with the co-workers.

I think it is unique that the shop steward is pulled so close that the manager take her into her confidence. What do you think about this? If I make these changes? How would that affect the employees and our future?... this is a knowledge I have and use, but I do not share it with others.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 3)

In this informal space, it is important that the shop steward respects the secrecy of the strategic information they are entrusted by management. To pass on any strategic information would put management in a difficult position both in regard to the employees and the top management, and be a breach of trust with management that would make future informal contacts difficult. Because of this high level of management vulnerability, secrecy is pivotal to the building of mutual trust.

The secrecy of the relation also increase shop steward vulnerability because there is no institutionalized justification of shop stewards keeping strategic management information from co-workers. On the contrary , it would be in line with the shop steward role and union policy to share this information. Managers and shop stewards must, consequently, build their informal collaboration on both trust and secrecy.

The contextual meaning of formal and informal spaces

In the formal spaces such as the work council, there are institutionalized expectations and governance which increases transparency such as agendas and minutes which are circulated to employees.

[regarding the relationship with management] You have to create trust, through a space where 'we' can talk openly with each other, without taking minutes and having a chairman. We [manager and shop steward] talk just as we are doing now. Then we have opinions at the open meetings where minutes are taken, but we still influence each other at the closed meetings.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 2)

Trust in the informal relationship requires secrecy and cannot exist alongside transparency. Because the informal conversations are undocumented and secret, both parties do not have to commit strongly to their specific interests and positions, making more room for manoeuvring and compromising, giving shop stewards more influence compared to the more rigid opinions and interests voiced in the formal fora. Secrecy helps build and maintain trust and allows management and shop stewards to entrust information and try out different solutions and strategies without compromising their bargaining positions or negotiation mandate, because they avoid the external judgment that would follow from transparency.

As a space for negotiation, the informal space was much preferred by shop stewards, but only if mutual trust was present. If not, the shop stewards described becoming unwilling to accept vulnerability, making negotiations and collaboration much more confrontational.

Trust is critical, if I don't feel that I have trust in the person I am negotiating with, then everything is done by the rules, no leeway is given. None at all.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 4)

In the interview, this shop steward described that the main topics of the informal relationship was the planning of future management initiatives and discussing the potential consequences of these initiatives. These are topics with a broad scope and long temporal horizon, and they are also the type of topics in which the employees are disinterested. Shop stewards contribute to these conversations by offering their insight into the thoughts, motives, and perspectives of the employees, making informed guesses as to their reactions to a particular initiative. This is information given to the shop steward in a relationship based on secrecy and co-worker trust, a privileged access to the employee perspective out of reach to management. The information allows management to adjust and adapt their strategies and goals so as to encounter the least resistance from employees. This sharing of strategic information binds management and shop stewards together in a type of trust partly based on the sharing of inside secrets. Once the secrecy relationship of mutual vulnerability is established and tested, it becomes more straight-forward to maintain mutual

trust in future informal discussions, and the informal space becomes preferable to the cumbersome formal spaces.

The trusting, informal relationship between shop steward and management is not just efficient in itself but also affects the formal negotiations. In the quote above, the shop steward makes it clear that without trust there can be no leeway in formal negotiations. However, trust built in the informal space can be carried into formal negotiations and helps facilitate and underpin the commitment to ongoing negotiations:

It is important to look at the whole picture and not get lost in particular issues. You create relations and network with the people you have to work with in the future. You are creating a trust space with the people you are negotiating with. You have to behave and be loyal to those agreements that are reached and the deals you make. You have to stand by the negotiated deal even when the road gets rocky.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 2)

Trust work in relation to management

The trust between management and shop stewards is based on mutual interest within the contextual meaning of organizational long-term planning. Outside of formal fora, both parties work to establish an informal space for dialogue where they can entrust each other with information of key strategic significance to the future prospects of the organization. However, since they each share information that makes them vulnerable, the informal space requires secrecy. This secrecy, in turn, binds both shop stewards and management to the trust relation and strengthens it because of the mutual vulnerability involved in entrusting sensitive information. Finally, the relational properties developed in the informal space spill over into formal space, because the pre-existing mutual trust endures across venues and the informal space allows shop steward and management to sort out small issues without the pressure of transparency.

The trust work of a trusted intermediary

The shop steward mediates between the management and co-worker perspective and the contextual meaning of both relations, because they serve as trusted intermediaries:

Being a good trust representative is to be attentive to both the management and the employees. If things then conflict, then you have to be in between and try to get things moving in the same direction, so that they don't go in different directions. You have to listen to frustration from both parties and then try to make some suggestions that bring them closer to each other. It does not always happen, but you have to try your best.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 4)

Most of the interviewed shop stewards described their role as an intermediary between management and co-workers, since they have to understand both perspectives in order to achieve the best results. The shop stewards are privy to information and insights from both employees and management, giving them a perspective on the organization that is not available to others.

Intuitively, we would expect shop stewards to be transparent to co-workers about their dealings with management and to observe secrecy and confidentiality to management about their dealings with co-workers. Consequently, the active use of secrecy to co-workers about dealing with management and transparency to management about some dealings with co-workers seems counterintuitive. However, our study shows that shop stewards actively use transparency and secrecy in both relations to build and maintain trust in their role as trusted intermediaries and that this role give them more influence on management and better access to co-workers perspective. This trust work, balancing secrecy and transparency is grounded in the active compartmentalisation of specific topics in situational and institutional contexts. It is the contextual meaning of these specific compartments which makes the counterintuitive use of secrecy meaningful and justified to the shop stewards.

Compartmentalising information

The most significant type of trust work carried out by the shop stewards is the compartmentalisation of specific discussions or topics within either formal, transparent spaces of collaboration with management or informal, in-transparent spaces of collaboration with management (Parker 2016, Ringel 2019, Luhrmann 1989). The formal, visible compartmentalization, and the informal, invisible compartmentalization comes with different contextual meaning (Johnston and Selsky 2005). The informational flow between these two compartments is limited, but the relations built in each compartment may spill over and have a positive or negative effect on the other compartment.

The topics that shop stewards and management deal with in the formal space are mostly excluded from the informal space. Critically, all binding agreements are made in the formal system, including topics such as pay, working hours, vacation, maternity, and sick leave. These issues strongly resonate with the employee short-term perspective, and the employees actively voice their own interests on these issues to the shop stewards. Consequently, these are issues where employees require shop stewards to represent their interests most directly and with transparency and accountability that require the shop steward to align visibly with the co-worker, short term perspective.

I think the management needs to know, if we do this what do you then think? What would the scenario be - both worst and best case? Then I can say: that element would be really good, but you have to consider this and that. I think that helps the management achieve a good result, because if the employees are not on board when it comes to new initiatives and ideas then it is a lost cause. So trust is important and you have to work in order to obtain it.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 5)

The issues that are part of the local agreements we discuss in MED [work council], primarily issues regarding pay and other terms and conditions.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 2)

The primary topics of informal, secret interactions, in contrast, relate to personal matters, future initiatives, and the identification of specific challenges facing the workplace in the longer term. By excluding binding agreements and distributive

bargaining issues connected to the short-term co-worker perspective from the informal space, both sides can lower their guard. This includes sharing secrets and compartmentalizing them in the informal space without violating the employee expectations of transparency and accountability.

A couple of years back we had a guy retire, usually that means that I contact my manager regarding filling the open position, however she had told me about a coming reform here at the hospital, that would cut back on jobs. So having that information allowed me to steer clear of a situation where we would have had to let one of the employees go.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 2)

Nonetheless, the legitimacy of the relation is highly questionable should employees discover what is being shared in secrecy within the informal space.

I have been told things in confidence that should have been said at a formal meeting, My leader told me about some coming layoffs, but since it was not on the record I could not act on it.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 4)

Compartmentalizing roles and relations

The informal and formal spaces are inherently different, and part of the trust work carried out by shop stewards to maintain trust as intermediaries is to interact differently with managers, depending on the space. Consequently, the two different spaces also compartmentalize different roles and rules of interaction: intersubjective trust and secrecy in the informal space and institutionalized roles and procedures of mistrust and transparency in the formal space. Their ability to maintain this role duality depends on a collective effort toward maintaining the contextual meaning of each space: one is a formally institutionalized space of transparent governance, the other one of informal exchange and collaboration towards shared goals.

This compartmentalization of roles is successful because of the trust developed in the informal space is often carried into the formal space. This is not the case

with the mode of interaction, which is shaped by the contextual meaning, but having recourse to the other space help maintain the cooperation in both.

A good shop steward is of course also someone who has the trust of the employees but also the trust of the management. Because we are positioned in the tension between employees and management. We have to act in that tension, for instance by bringing viewpoints of the employees to the management. That is not possible if we come flying in with the red banners tearing the door of its hinges, every time there is an issue we need to discuss. We have to maintain a reasonable climate of cooperation with our managers.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 5)

The shop steward above describes the tensions facing a trusted intermediary and the purpose of doing trust work to maintain that role. A key issue in the success of that trust work is to compartmentalise their level of alignment to the management perspective. If they publicly align their own perspective to the management perspective, it becomes very difficult for them to appear loyal to the employees. Consequently, alignment is compartmentalised in the informal space and only tentative, but forms an important basis of trust building which researches beyond that space. Similarly, conflictual topics with high levels of employee interest can be handled in the formal space, with full transparency to maintain co-worker trust. This will not necessarily influence management trust because conflict fits the institutionalized rules of engagement in formal spaces and because management have recourse the informal space as well. The shop steward perform two different roles within these two distinct compartments, but the trust built in the informal space, makes conflict more manageable in the formal space. This is the precarious balance of a trusted intermediary which requires continuous, laborious trust work to maintain.

However, some shop stewards chose to abandon the role of trusted intermediary and maintain trust primarily in one relationship.

On the side of caution

Some shop stewards aim only to build and maintain a high level of trust among the employees. This is a trust work strategy in which shop stewards seek a high level of transparency and do not compartmentalise information and relations to management between in formal and informal spaces. These shop stewards act in every situation as if the situation was transparent to the co-workers—even if it is not—which confine the shop steward and manager to the contextual meaning of formal spaces. This strategy aims to build and maintain co-worker trust through full transparency and accountability, making it impossible to share secrets and establish an informal trust relationship with management. The shop stewards align with the employee short-term perspective on the organization and do not aim to build dual trust in their role as intermediary. The result is, that they do not get access to the wider scope and temporal horizon of management's planning processes—even if they seek it – which reduce their influence on issues outside of day-to-day problems and on the general management perspective on the organization. This trust work strategy maintains employee trust and accountability at all costs (including reduced influence) by adhering vehemently to the formal representative role of the shop steward.

I: I have been told by other shop stewards that they say things one way when they have informal discussions with the leader and another way when there is someone taking minutes at a formal meeting, do you also adjust your behaviour according to the setting?

R: I don't really think about that, no I don't, because I am no good at sugar coating things or remembering to watch out for this and that, so I take some hits because of that.

(Shop steward, FOA Chapter 3)

On the side of influence

Another trust work strategy was mentioned only when the recorder was switched off. Shop stewards talked of this strategy to describe other shop stewards they consider disloyal to their co-workers. Specifically, this involves developing a very close and trusting relationship with management in the pursuit of informal influence. This was perceived as over-alignment with the management perspective and a failure to correctly compartmentalise issues

important to the co-workers within the formal space. Such shop stewards were accused of losing the employee perspective and legitimacy. These shop stewards may be seeking to maximize influence by committing heavily to building trust with management through an extended informal space and secrecy. The strategy, however, comes at the cost of reduced co-worker trust due to the loss of transparency and a low level of alignment with co-worker short term interest within the formal space, which is the critique raised against these shop stewards in the interviews. The trust relationship with management becomes suspicious and indicative of dark secrets despite any strategic aim and the trust in the shop steward role as intermediary fails on the co-worker side.

Discussion

The point of departure for this paper was Simmel's claim that secrecy may build trust among those sharing secrets and among those withholding information from each other. We investigated this issue of information selection in the context of trusted intermediaries who use secrecy and transparency to build trust in two conflicting relationships.

Our study shows that secrecy allow shop stewards to develop trust relationships with management beyond what would expected, intuitively. Three different function of secrecy help this trust emerge. First, secrecy binds participants to the shared secret and each other through a bond of identification, conforming to Goffmans (2002) notion of inside secrets. Secrecy is in it self a powerful social connection which identify the participants to each other as included and every one else as excluded (Simmel 1906). Secondly, sharing secrets enforce trustworthiness because the mutual entrusting of sensitive information give participants the power to reveal sensitive information about each other, including that fact that they involved in secrecy (Luhmann 1989, Costas and Gray 2014). Entrusting information is a key element in active trust building (Möllering, 2005), encapsulating interests (Hardin 2004) and grant the participants power over each other because secrecy is in it self a dark secret (Goffman 2002). Finally, shared secrecy remove transparency and consequently reduce vulnerability concerns greatly as long as secrecy holds. This makes

secrecy a fertile bed for trust building, because secrecy temporarily brackets concerns about other social relations and allow the participants to cooperate and align to each other (Frederiksen, 2014b), Ringel 2019, Stohl and Stohl 2011). Trust research suggests that trust relations operate with a more extended time horizon in terms of positive expectations than relations without trust (Luhmann 1979, Frederiksen and Heinskou). The creativity in problem solving unleashed by trust (Barbalet 2009), depends on the aligning of perspectives in this case study – an alignment impossible without secrecy. While transparency and institutional control is useful for trust building in some instances (Wattimo and Webb 1992, Hood 2007, Bachmann and Inkpen 2001, Curry 2011), such as co-worker trust in shop steward confidentiality, our study shows that transparency also reduces the space for dual alignment and adaptation for trusted intermediaries. Secrecy as a trust work strategy allows the trusted intermediary to disassociate the two relations temporarily through effective compartmentalization of topics, practices and meaning to create this space for alignment and adaptation, extending the temporal horizon of collaboration (Frederiksen 2014 a,b) . This makes secrecy a powerful tool for building intersubjective trust and unleashing the creative and problem-solving potential of trust. This trust work strategy also empowers the trusted intermediaries role as a gate keeper of information between management and employees, strengthening the shop stewards role as a weak tie (Granovetter, 1973) . However, there is a risk of trust capture, where shop stewards err of the side of influence and come to depend too much on this informal space of secrecy and become the target of co-worker suspicions of dark secrets.

It is also of note that trust built within the informal, secret space is not compartmentalised but spill over into the formal spaces extending the space of possibilities and reducing the level of distributive bargaining even in negotiations fully transparent to co-workers. This suggest that the evolution of trust within the informal compartment moves from calculation towards identification (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000) (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000), making trust more durable, but also potentially more problematic to co-workers. However, the beneficial consequences of increased trust between shop stewards

and management on formal space negotiations and results, may potentially maintain or increase co-worker trust in shop stewards.

Secondly, this study suggests that the strategic use of secrecy in trust work requires an efficient compartmentalisation of both information and practices within domains of specific contextual meaning. Shop stewards draw strong and clear compartment boundaries between topics and information that can be handled in the informal, secret space and topics and information that must be handled in the formal, transparent space. This does not mean that only unimportant topics are handled in the informal space; rather, it means that the same fundamental issues are made sense of in different, contextual ways and, in particular, different temporal perspectives (Frederiksen, 2014c). In the short-term perspective of binding agreements and specific workplace policies, issues are made transparent in the formal space, while similar issues are engaged in the strategic, non-binding form of long-term planning in the informal space. This finding points to the relevance of trust work and compartmentalization of information entrusting as an important element in trust building in general. Compartmentalisation may, in other approaches, be considered lying, deceiving or similar things, but suspending moral evaluation, this study points to compartmentalization as a crucial competence for trusted intermediaries. Existing research have clearly documented the role of contextual meaning in building trust and that trust is integrated into relevant contextual meaning (Alalehto & Larsson, 2016) (Child & Möllering, 2003) (Kwantes & McMurphy, 2021), not least from a sense-making perspective (Ahmad, Ferlie, & Atun, 2013) (Bachmann, Gillespie, & Priem, 2015) (Fuglsang & Jagd, 2015). Our study further suggest that trustees may strategically and actively switch between and use different forms of contextual meaning and relation building to create a space for adaptation and alignment in otherwise high conflict negotiations. We should consequently think of these separate compartmentalisations as different ways the shop steward translate co-worker interest into specific types of contextual meaning to gain influence on both short and long term perspectives. The study also suggest that those who strike the right balance between using these compartments are those who gain the most influence and are most successful as trusted intermediaries. This confirms findings from other research areas, which

suggests that preexisting transparency and general trustbuilding increase acceptance of secrecy in small group negotiations (Walker & Biedenkopf, 2020) and trust in negotiations (Yao & Brett, 2021) and street level bureaucrats (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). A general experience of alignment among a larger constituency will build sufficient trust to allow trusted intermediaries limited forms of intransparency and the informal space of secrecy necessary to efficiently pursue influence. These findings point to an underexplored field in trust research on how an alignment in terms of the contextual meaning in one specific setting allow trust to be generalised beyond that specific situation and specific contextual meaning. While spill-over effects of distrust are well known (Høyer and Mønness 2015, Wielhouwer 2015, Iancono 2018), this is not the case for trust. Our findings do not contradict the general assumption that transparency is conducive to trust (Casati, 2010; Sztompka, 1998) (Rawlins, 2008) (Han, 2020) (Giddens, 1991) (Seligman, 1997), but rather adds the modification that that sufficient transparency on important and visible topics will prevent limited forms of intransparency and secrecy from becoming conspicuous and suspicious. This is the balance that shop stewards use in their trust work and which is of key important to trusted intermediaries.

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