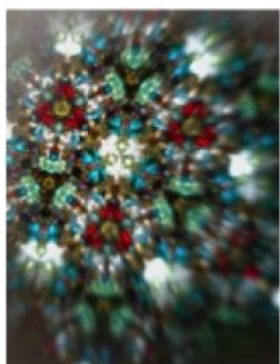


Trust in Organisational Life



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Safeguarding my own trustworthiness

Louie Gardiner



This article is a personal illumination, and a mutual exploration involving me and you as reader, of trust-making and trustworthiness. In what follows I offer a different way of seeing and understanding these notions. I first use myself and the process of writing this piece as source material. What I reveal about my inner processing was real and present in the moments of writing. What I suggest might be going on for you as you read this piece is clearly imaginary.... until or unless you confirm that you did indeed experience some or all of what I suggest you might! I offer a short introduction to the principles of complexity thinking and Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS).

I then show how I apply these principles to illuminate the components and dynamics of how we make meaning – illustrating how ‘meaning-making’ can be seen and understood in the context of CAS. I show that judgements about trust and trustworthiness are made in relationship to others within contexts and that, even though we cannot control the meanings others make, we can personally take action to safeguard our own trustworthiness

Keywords:

trust, trustworthiness, complexity, patterns, Complex Adaptive Systems, fast/slow thinking, Potent 6 Constellation

What is trust?

Trust is a much used term. How do I know if others are to be trusted? Can I trust that person to do their job? Do I trust that dog with my children? Do I trust my friend with my story? Can I trust the surgeon with my life? Can I trust my colleague not to steal my idea? Do I even trust myself? Such questions assume the answers are binary – yes or no. Am I trustworthy... or not? The answer being sought is an absolute. The implication is that whatever the response, it is true about you and me - always.

These questions reveal that the concept of trust can be understood as a judgement – an interpretation, a conclusion, an assumption. Does this mean that the notion of trust/ trustworthiness is only in the minds of another or is something else at play? Look see! She is trustworthy – but I would not trust the bankers! And on what basis do we determine someone’s trustworthiness? What exactly is it and how is it made? What does it mean when we say that trust has been destroyed? And can it be fixed? These questions expose additional assumptions – the idea that trust might be something tangible that can be created/ destroyed,

given/ taken away. Of course we KNOW that trust is not an object or badge we can pick up and wear. But if it is not a thing, what then is it and how does it come to be? What do we do, or can we do, that might influence what and how others see, experience, judge and react to us?

Mistrust in the making

Let me return to an earlier question to unpack this a little more. Am I trustworthy? I explore this question using the components aka 'portals' of a framework called the Potent 6 Constellation (P6C) – see Figure 1. The portals are mentioned in [square brackets] below. The labels used for the portals will be familiar to you but their persistent presence and the interplay between them is unlikely to be. {NB. If your preference is for explanation over unfolding discovery, you may want to head to Paradigms, patterns and portals before continuing reading}.

When I turn the question on myself, I connect with the discomfort I feel [feelings] when I think that others might conclude that I am either trustworthy or not. Yet the moment I expose the implicit absolute assumption [fictions] that “I can/ cannot be trusted always, in every situation, with every person”, I reveal the weakness in the assertion. Interestingly, as I write those words, I become aware of a tumble of personal stories coming to mind. The numerous times I have demonstrated my trustworthiness seem hard to recall. Not so the few occasions in which I or others have judged me to have acted in an untrustworthy manner.

For each of the negative examples I feel an insistent urge to defend/ protect myself [purpose] for what I did/ did not do: “I can explain! There was a context! None of it was straightforward! Please don't jump to negative conclusions about me!” I wonder if I should explain myself to you [decision]? I pause. I recognise that if I were to do that, I would be trying to prove myself [purpose] to be trustworthy thereby hoping to protect [purpose] myself from imagined unwanted consequences [outcomes] e.g. you making negative judgements about me; my being laughed at or rejected. As I sit with the possibility of these future imaginings [outcomes], I reconnect with the shame and guilt [feelings] about my past actions and remember the cascade of internal accusations/ assumptions [fictions] I once screamed at myself such as: “you really ***** this up! You could and should have behaved differently! You useless ****!” Then, as I imagine sharing what I actually did/did not do [facts], I notice yet more fictions showing up in my mind - this time, about you: “You won't understand. You will spread gossip about me. You will ruin my professional reputation irrevocably.” The moment these thoughts arrive, I recognise that I am in danger of seeing you as untrustworthy.

My spin, spins you

You know none of the content nor context of my stories.... And yet, despite this, I know you will not be able to stop yourself making meaning [fictions] even though I have given you no details [facts]. You may imagine [fictions] what my stories might have been and may remember experiences of your own [facts, fictions, feelings]. And even though I have not shared any details [facts], you may find yourself thinking that I must have done something dastardly [more fictions] and that I therefore must be untrustworthy [outcomes]. By reflecting on what might go on in you, I can see that my decision to withhold the facts of my stories might reap the very outcomes I want to avert. This is a trap in which we unconsciously and repeatedly get caught. In the above example, I show how I fall into it and how you may fall in with me.

Let's continue the not-so-fantastical fantasy. As you continue reading, you may notice feelings evoked by recalling your own experiences. Perhaps you feel irritated and annoyed that I have reconnected you to things that you, quite frankly, want to forget?! If so, yet more unwanted fictions and uncomfortable feelings will likely accumulate and spin within you until finally – perhaps – they may spill over causing you to react. You may stop reading. You may blurt something out loud. You may even continue reading. In all cases, you will most likely have acted without engaging in a rational decision-making process. Something deeper and beyond consciousness will have been running. Your behaviour will point to purpose(s) playing in/through you. Perhaps you feel excited and full of curiosity as I introduce new ways of seeing and understanding? If so, you will keep reading because you want to know more. Perhaps you are comforted because I am sharing a perspective similar to your own? You will continue reading to affirm your own views. Alternatively, you may disagree with me and may feel angry, frustrated or even a little scared? Or perhaps you are bored with my mental processing – thinking it is all pure abstraction? In both these final scenarios you may stop reading... OR you may continue so as to equip yourself to disprove or discredit my propositions.

Your actions/ inactions will be a culmination of your sense-making process involving an unconscious internal interplay. Let me draw this together.

Above, I revealed part of the internal processing that actually played out within me as I started writing this article. Drawing on my past experiences with clients and myself, I then imagined [fictionalised] what might go on for you as the reader. Without ever meeting each other, a pattern of mistrust potentially will have arrived in the space between me and you: you mistrusting me because of what I did/did not reveal; and I mistrusting you as I judged you judging me as untrustworthy! For many of us, the patterns, processes and content of our sense-making is largely inaccessible. If this remains the case, what hope do we have of being able to mitigate the consequences of our misunderstandings?

We find ourselves in these spins because, no matter how desperately we want our inner processing to be tidy, logical and sequential, actually it is contextual, nonlinear and unbiddable. Moreover, our usual ways of trying to grasp and manage what is going on within and between us, do not reflect the complex reality at play. Although the example I have used is in part, imagined, I hope I have shown through the P6C portals in Figure 1 below that the personal and relational sense-making dance is real enough. More of this later.

Fast and slow thinking

I consider myself to be a strong reflective and reflexive practitioner, yet I remain a fallible, often reactive human being. I am affected by the unconscious categorising human processing which happens within me from which my repeating personal patterns emerge. Daniel Kahneman (2011) suggests this “fast thinking” is a necessary and central feature of the human condition. It is helpful when it alerts us to actual threat and has us running for the nearest emergency exit. However, it is problematic if we are blindly controlled by unfounded assumptions. If left unchallenged these may drive us to decisions and actions that could bring forth the very dangers we wish to avoid. Our thinking can get stuck in out-dated ruts unless new information is accessed.

For example, the assertions proffered by Trump in his 2016 US presidential campaign allude to a man being played by that which is invisible within and to him. No amount of parading alternative evidence before him is

making him alter his perspective or behaviours. Kahneman suggests that it takes conscious effort to engage in 'slow' thinking – and it is this that enables us to break out of default patterns of thinking, being and doing. Sometimes events may shock us into unfamiliar territory, enabling us to see what we previously could not see. However, it still takes time and effort to process new data and unless we engage and tussle with it, it will not invoke internal change or learning. As cognitive neuroscientist, Walter Freeman (2007:no page number) says: “the self can only know and incorporate what the brain makes within itself.” This is true too when acquiring a new skill or benefiting from the process of digestion: you showing me an apple and telling me how good it is for me, will not nourish me.



Image 1: [Seeing is not eating](#) (Creative Commons photo by [Danielle Helm](#))

I must bite the apple, chew it, swallow it; break it down even further in my gut so that my digestive juices can make use of it. Only then can it help me grow.

So, it seems we cannot change others simply by talking at them or showing them pictures and presentations with compelling pre-digested information. Newness can be confusing and worrisome. If the new or different does not match our expectations, we will try to squeeze it into our ready-made, fast-thinking categories. If we cannot make the data fit, we may end up resisting, discrediting or discarding it - thereby keeping our existing frames of reference neatly intact.



Returning to Kahneman's proposition, we can assume that without engaging in slow thinking Trump will hold on to the views generated by his fast thinking – and he will be driven to follow through on the actions he advocates. And here is the rub when it comes to being seen as trustworthy or not. If you agree with Trump, and he consistently lives up to what you want and expect of him, you will deem him trustworthy. Yet if you disagree with him, your judgements will be different. Is this really what we mean when we talk about trust/ trustworthiness: that we trust someone when they say and do as we want AND expect them to; and when they do not deliver, we doubt them?

Image 2: [Trump fixed on winning](#) (CC [Creative Commons public domain](#))

Paradigms, patterns and portals

How else might we understand what is going on? This article is about trust and trustworthiness, and at a deeper, more general level, it is about internal and relational processes that affect our interactions and actions. Essentially, I am suggesting that our internal meaning-making can be understood as a self-organising, complex adaptive system (CAS) (Prigogine, 1980; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Nicolis, 1989; Prigogine, 1997; Holland, 2006). See further explanation by clicking on this [hyperlink](#) (p22). A CAS can be defined as a collection of diverse individual 'agents' that have the freedom to act unpredictably and whose actions are interconnected in ways that create system-wide patterns, which in turn influence the behaviour of the agents. When I apply this CAS definition to single individuals, I am proposing that the portals of the P6C constitute the basic components of our inner processing. In my earlier exposition (Mistrust in the making), I demonstrated how it is possible to identify activated content/agents present and interacting in each portal. Why and how is this helpful?

Towards a Paradigm shift

A conventional worldview – as that embodied by Trump - would have us believe that life is simple: things are black or white/ right or wrong; we can manage, control and change ourselves, others and the world on command; walls will keep people out; buses, trains and planes could and should arrive according to their timetables; people could, should and will do as they say; our truth is the only truth (and everyone else is wrong); we can plan the future, set five-year goals and make everything happen as designed and expected. Despite being faced with oceans of evidence suggesting the contrary, many people hold steadfast to such beliefs. So much so, that - even when unexpected events confront us with our volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) reality - we variously resist, deny, rebel, walk away, give up, start pushing harder or pulling tighter on the reins of control. Believing we can predict, manage and control complexity and make change happen on demand does not mean that we can.

We think we know much more about how we as human beings process our experiences. Yet still we struggle to translate new knowledge and theories about complexity into accessible day-to-day practices that help us embrace, engage with and navigate our lives and relationships with greater ease, joy and wisdom. This quest preoccupied me until, after years of ongoing research and emergent inquiry, the P6C finally revealed itself to me.

The P6C represents a paradigm shift towards nonlinear practice. It offers a practical way to illuminate the variables and self-organising dynamics that invoke our personal and relational patterns. The process of illumination invokes self-organising, transformational shifts. Expanding further on the nonlinear deployment and dynamics of the P6C is beyond the scope of this article. However, I think it is helpful to say a bit more about patterns to give a sense of the essence of the P6C in action and how this illuminates the topic in hand.

Influencing patterns

We need only look back on our lives, to recognise our own repeating patterns and their consequences. If changing our personal patterns were as easy as 'just think differently' or 'just do something else', we surely would all be living more joyful, untroubled lives! In CAS, we cannot change a pattern on command. Why?

Because patterns are emergent properties. In other words, they arise out of the conditions/ variables that are in, interacting with and affecting the system(s). To influence a pattern consciously, we need to notice the variables.

The other difficulty, is that even if we modify a variable, this will not guarantee that the pattern will change in the direction we want or anticipate. Why? Because the interplay between the variables is nonlinear – this means that simple cause-and-effect relations do not apply. Nonlinear causality essentially means that infinite variables are affecting infinite other variables making it impossible to predict, manage or control what happens when one of the variables or one of the interactions changes. Hang in there with me. What am I actually saying is happening within you and within me?

I am suggesting that our personal and relational (fast-thinking) patterns emerge in situations/ contexts from the interactions between specific 'content/agents' within ever-present sense-making components - as per the six portals in the P6C. The P6C equips us to reveal these fast-thinking patterns. In the process, it shifts us into slow-thinking which affords the possibility of a transformative turn in our seeing, sense-making and action-taking. It does this, not by rational cognition nor on demand, but by making the act of illumination simple. I think of the P6C as 'mindfulness map' helping us to notice what is present and noticed; and what might be activated but out of view.

Potent 6 Constellation illuminating our patterns through portal interplay

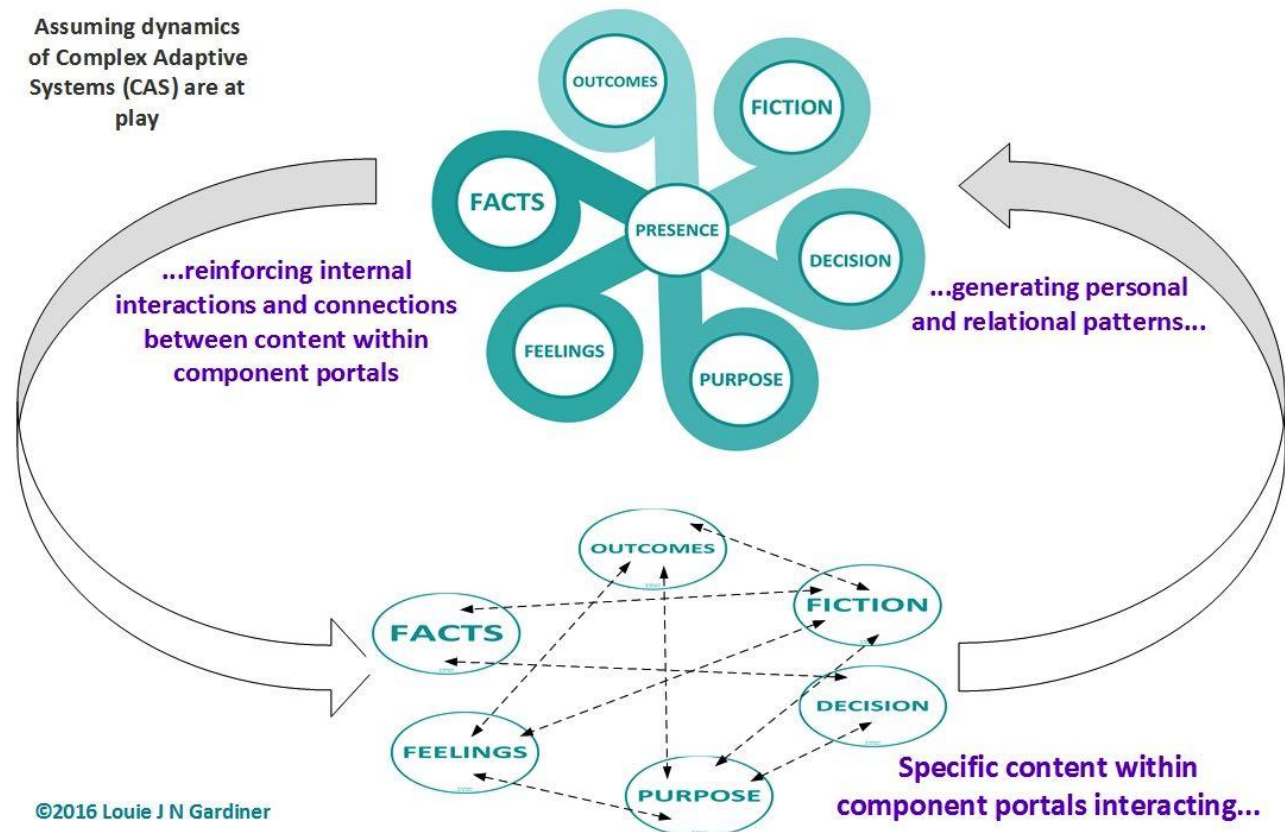


Figure 1: P6C as Complex Adaptive System - reveals what activates our being, doing, feeling and thinking patterns

Each of the P6C portals can be viewed as a 'type of agent' interacting with the other types of agents, generating patterns. Moreover, each agent is simultaneously a pattern generated by the interplay of the other interacting agents. This notion ties in with the principles of CAS and Semantic Fields Theory - SFT (Hardy, 1998; 2000).

So, in every situation – such as my decision to write this article – content/agents in each of the portals gets activated. As if they are individual agents, they interact, generating patterns. These can be feeling patterns, thinking patterns or behavioural patterns. Some patterns may remain 'hidden' within us whilst others will tip out (Gladwell, 2001) and manifest through our interactions with others. Hence, you and I could end up mistrusting each other, even though we have never met and the only material data exchanged between us is my writing this article and you reading it. Mistrust or trust, in this context, constitute patterns of thought which may be agents/components in other thinking, feeling or behavioural patterns. {Now would be a good time to return to Mistrust in the making if you skipped it earlier}.

Transformative tips

Let me now bring these threads together using an example that occurred nine years ago when the title of this article first materialised: Safeguarding my own trustworthiness. The context and manner of its arrival anchored an important insight that much later, contributed to the formation of the P6C and my coming to understand how to deploy it.

The phrase emerged during a leadership programme involving an incredibly diverse group that included community members and employees from mixed-sector partnership bodies in an impoverished neighbourhood. We began our learning experience by trying to establish what we meant by confidentiality. At its most obvious, it meant not sharing another person's story - not ever, not anywhere - without their express permission to do so (with the usual legal safeguarding caveats i.e. unless we were concerned about someone harming themselves or others). The unspoken yet unanimous decision-pattern being enacted amongst us was this: "I am not sharing anything meaningful about myself unless I can be sure I can trust everyone." We saw that while ever we held that position, we would never open up to each other. Everyone was waiting for everyone else to prove they could be trusted FIRST. This was brought shockingly into view by one of our group. He said that if he told us what was really going on his life – and if one of us passed that on - then his life would be in danger. The pattern of mistrust was already present amongst us and it was based on not knowing very much about anyone else in the room!

We explored further. We tried to unpick what we understood about trust. This line of inquiry brought no new insights. Then I asked a different question: "What is it that leads us to talk about others or share stories that are not our own?" Boom! Out came a cascade of revelations. For example, we might share another person's story to:

- fit in/ belong with others (if I tell you about that person you might include me in your group/ gang).
- gain favour with someone else (if I tell you this thing about that person you might give me special treatment).
- feel special/ enhance my reputation (if I tell you their awful story.... you will see that people are willing to trust me... so I must be important, worthy etc.).

- divert negative judgement away from me (if I tell you theirs... I can distract your attention from my own ... which would show me in a worse light).
- feel better about myself (if I tell you.... you might like me more... and if you like me then I must be OK).

We recognised that beneath these more easily identifiable intentions was the driving purpose to protect ourselves. Exposing our deeper hidden assumptions about ourselves and others, revealed how flawed our unconscious thinking patterns were. Through sharing the facts



of another person's story infused by our interpretations / fictions - and doing so without their permission - we actually seeded unwanted and unintended outcomes for the other person AND ourselves. The purpose paradox became clear: when unconsciously and unquestioningly acting on fear-fuelled, self-protective urges,



we rendered ourselves and others less safe - potentially damaging others, ourselves, our relationships and our reputations. Finally, we understood how it was up to each of us to safeguard our own trustworthiness - that it started with ourselves and not with anyone else.

Our shared insight landed in the space between us. All but one signed our simple written agreement "I agree to take personal responsibility for safeguarding my own trustworthiness." The person who feared for his life chose to leave. Our process of coming to that profound insight and shared agreement forged a deep commitment to each other's growth, and held us together throughout an amazingly stretching, challenging and transformative year-long programme.



Images 3, 4 and 5: Inspiring Leaders Graduation ~ A Community Celebration, 2008 (©Louie Gardiner)

Implications for me, personally and professionally

In the years since that experience, many things have become clearer to me. I came to realise that safeguarding my own trustworthiness called for so much more than 'keeping confidences' - especially as a professional working with and supporting others in their own lives, relationships and work. When it comes to trustworthiness, I see consistency as necessary but insufficient if it is playing in a context that denies the humanity of and care for others. Implicit in my conception of trustworthiness is the notion of 'caritas' – care and compassion.



Image 1: Sharing P6C at 'Seeds of Inspiration' 2016, Switzerland (copyright free)

I realise that I cannot control another's meaning-making; but I can influence it by what I do and how I engage. I can hold myself to account to that which I hold dear; illuminate what activates and is activated in me and work towards resolution and coherence. Thus, even if I find myself alone, I can stand alongside myself with authenticity, courage, caritas, dignity and humility. The P6C helps me do this.

Safeguarding my own trustworthiness is a profoundly bold intention and aspiration which sits at the heart of my personal and professional practice. I use it to guide me – and in true human fashion, I still miss things and mess things up. I seek out the support of others to make amends for what has gone awry.

Crucially, I also invite others to take this commitment on as their own; and I pass on the P6C as a way of equipping all of us to live into it. In recent years our small practitioner community has been growing and our influence is beginning to touch lives in new places locally and globally – as in the trust-building fellowship, Initiatives of Change in which I began my doctoral research.

As I come to the close of this article I find myself with another answer to the question about why I am undertaking my Doctorate and why I am subjecting myself and my praxis – including the P6C – to academic scrutiny. Why bother, when I know it works in practice? Quite simply, I realise I am safeguarding my own trustworthiness and am seeking to safeguard the trustworthiness of others who choose to take this work on for themselves and in their work with others.



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About the author

Louie Gardiner is a doctoral researcher and founder of Potent 6. She is a master-accredited coach, facilitator and consultant with a passion for enabling personal and systemic transformation. She is a pioneer – frequently finding herself playing alone on the edges, eagerly waiting for others to come along and join in the next adventure. Next on the horizon, Louie is working with artists on a project to place art at the centre of personal, social and civic transformation.

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A note about AMED



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