

Trust Equilibrium - Descriptive Framework

Author: Kok Pian Gew

Version: v0.1 (Frozen)

Status: Public record

Date: 09 Feb 2026

1. Status of This Document

This document is a **descriptive framework** for understanding trust.

It provides:

- conceptual distinctions
- vocabulary discipline
- interpretive boundaries

It does **not**:

- propose a formal model
- quantify trust
- prescribe governance or behaviour
- optimise outcomes

The framework is provided for inspection, critique, misuse, and rejection.

It makes no claim to empirical truth beyond its stated descriptions.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this framework is to:

- Describe **distinct modes of trust** that operate within human and institutional contexts
- Explain why these modes are often confused with one another
- Prevent the collapse of fundamentally different trust mechanisms into a single concept
- Support clear thinking, writing, and comparison across domains

This framework is explanatory, not normative.

3. Scope and Non-Scope

3.1 In Scope

- Human interaction under uncertainty
- Institutional coordination
- Cultural and symbolic mechanisms
- Language and narrative framing of trust
- Descriptive distinctions between trust modes

3.2 Out of Scope

- Quantification or measurement of trust
- Ledger or accounting systems
- Optimisation or efficiency claims
- Governance design
- Moral or ethical justification
- Psychological completeness
- Policy recommendations
- Empirical calibration to real societies

Any framework addressing these belongs to a **different epistemic category**.

4. Epistemic Position

This framework is phenomenological and linguistic. It describes how trust:

- is experienced
- is invoked
- is relied upon in practice

It does not claim:

- predictive power
- completeness
- universality

Descriptions are constrained by observed use, institutional practice, and linguistic consistency, rather than personal belief or introspection. Multiple trust descriptions may be valid simultaneously.

5. Core Principle

Trust is not one thing.

It is a family of mechanisms humans use to manage uncertainty in relationships.

Many situations described as “loss of trust” are better understood as misalignment between different trust modes.

6. The Four Core Trust Modes

The trust modes described below are:

- **mutually incompatible at the point of use**
- **coexistent at the societal level**

They must not be collapsed into one another.

These trust modes do not correspond one-to-one with definitions in any single academic field. They represent a **descriptive synthesis** intended to clarify distinctions that are often implicit, overlapping, or conflated in existing literature.

6.1 Relational Trust

(Human / Original Trust)

Unmeasurable · Lived · Fragile

Exists only through continuation

Cannot be stored, transferred, or proven

Breaks asymmetrically

Heals slowly, if at all

Best suited for:

- intimacy
- care
- family
- moral responsibility
- irreversible harm

Narrative tone: quiet · human · incomplete

6.2 Instrumental Trust

(Measurable / Predictive)

Measurable · Predictive · Optimised

Exists as a score or expectation

Can be compared and traded

Enables scale and delegation

Replaces judgment with metrics

Best suited for:

- institutions
- markets
- platforms
- governance
- coordination at scale

Narrative tone: cold · procedural · legible

- “This form of trust does not depend on relational continuity.”
- “This form of trust does not imply moral responsibility.”
- “This form of trust does not repair relational rupture.”

6.3 Procedural Trust

(Rule-Based / Process Trust)

Rule-based · Role-dependent · Conditional

Trust is placed in the process, not the person

Compliance substitutes for belief

Failure is handled through escalation, not rupture

Examples:

- courts
- visas
- exams
- safety protocols
- bureaucracy

Key feature:

Trust persists even when no one is trusted.

Narrative tone: administrative · slow · frustrating

6.4 Symbolic / Narrative Trust

(Cultural / Meaning-Based)

Meaning-based · Cultural · Linguistic

Trust exists because:

- a story is shared
- a symbol is believed
- a role is respected
- a ritual is performed

This trust can be:

- deeply felt
- entirely false
- extremely durable

Examples:

- flags
- professions
- vows
- titles
- traditions
- myths

Narrative tone: mythic · collective · unstable

7. Coexistence Rule

No trust mode is superior.

No trust mode can replace another without loss.

Most failures occur when:

- instrumental trust is applied to relational domains
 - procedural trust is mistaken for care
 - symbolic trust is treated as proof
 - relational trust is demanded at scale
-

8. Transformation and Loss Across Trust Modes

Trust outcomes may transition between modes, but no transition is lossless.

- Trust does not convert directly between modes
- Outputs from one mode may be *reused* in another
- Each reuse strips context specific to the originating mode
- Relational trust cannot be reconstructed from downstream artefacts

When a procedural process produces an outcome—such as passing an examination—it generates legitimacy within a rule-bound system. That legitimacy is complete and sufficient

only within the procedure itself. When the same outcome is later repurposed for comparison or prediction, it leaves the procedural domain and enters instrumental use, where relative position substitutes for procedural context. The guarantees that once justified the outcome remain historically true, but they no longer govern interpretation.

- Procedural → Instrumental transition replaces compliance with comparability
- Instrumental outputs establish relative ordering, not intrinsic quality
- Predictive use introduces optimisation pressure and gaming incentives

As instrumental outputs are further elevated into titles, credentials, or status markers, symbolic trust may emerge. This symbolic layer can be culturally durable and emotionally powerful, yet it is increasingly detached from both the original procedure and the individual's lived capability. Meaning accumulates even as informational fidelity decays.

- Instrumental → Symbolic transition hardens signals into narratives
- Symbolic trust may persist long after its evidentiary basis has eroded

At no point in this chain does relational trust appear. Relational trust arises only through continued interaction and shared vulnerability and cannot be inferred, transferred, or restored from procedural legitimacy, instrumental ranking, or symbolic recognition. Once trust has left its originating mode, what is lost cannot be recovered downstream.

9. Failure and Misuse Modes

Common misuse includes:

- collapsing multiple trust modes into one
- treating measurability as legitimacy
- moralising procedural compliance
- assuming symbolic authority implies truth

These failures are **interpretive**, not technical.

10. Relationship to Other Frameworks

This framework is **purely descriptive**.

Any framework that:

- models trust accumulation
- introduces ledgers or state variables
- defines decision thresholds
- analyses stability or collapse

operates in a **separate formal domain** and must declare so explicitly.