The profession that came in from the cold: Trust and distrust in espionage

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Trust and distrust are important elements of the fiduciary relationship in the professions. Whether to trust or to distrust someone is a decision that has real consequences for success or failure of secret operations in undercover policing, in fraud investigation, or in audit. In this article, we focus on the spying profession as an extreme context in which we attempt to answer the question: how do spies navigate the trust/distrust dynamic in their work? The world of spies has often been out of bounds for those studying the professions and given that field studies in this context are extremely difficult, we analyzed biographies and autobiographies of secret agents. Based on our analysis, we identified different functions of trust and distrust: trust can be used as an instrument of manipulation and an option of last resort, while distrust is a protective mechanism aimed at shielding from vulnerability. We argue that a better understanding of trust and distrust dynamic may illuminate some of the behaviours of people in other professions.

KEYWORDS: distrust; espionage; secret service; spies; trust.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we studied the work of people employed by secret service organizations, commonly referred to as spies. The term ‘spy’ is a label from popular culture, but in practice the employees of secret service organizations are referred to as agents, secret agents, undercover agents, intelligence officers, analysts—among many other terms. Spies gather, examine, and capitalize on information to protect their countries against the political and economic consequences of security violations. Examples of contemporary intelligence organizations are the UK Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), the USA’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Swedish Security Service (SÄPO), and Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB). Notable historical agencies include the KGB in the Soviet Union (1954–91) and East Germany’s State Security Service (Stasi 1950–90). Spies have reported many different motives for joining secret service organizations: ideology, love of their country, satisfaction gained from deceiving others, profit-seeking, thrill of danger, and a sense of adventure (le Carré 2016). The significant negative consequences of becoming a spy include stress, fear of being caught, humiliation, deportation, and, in extreme circumstances, torture and death (Czarniawska, Siebert and Mackay 2023).

In this article, we study spies as a profession. Abbott (1988: 7) defined a profession as ‘an occupational group with some special skill. Usually, it was an abstract skill, one that required extensive training. It was not applied in a purely routine fashion, but required revised application case by case. In addition, professions were more or less exclusive’. Ackroyd described professions as ‘members of a limited group of high-status service occupations such as medicine, engineering and law. In addition to being repositories of authoritative knowledge, these occupations have some common features: restricted entry, high-level qualifications and stringent tests of competence, together with distinctive types of formal organisation’ (Ackroyd 2016: 15). In light of these definitions, the work of spies possesses some characteristics of the profession: they share a knowledge system and skills derived from education and training at a high level, but it is unclear whether or
not these originated in a widely recognized body of learning and research. They usually do not form professional associations. Becoming a member of the spy profession does not involve licensing, educational credentials, or professional registration under statutes; it is determined by the candidate's aptitude and imposture skills. Early literature on professional closure emphasized the role of group affiliation, including membership of secret societies (Simmel 1906). Later literature identified the formal mechanisms of maintaining professional closure, which served to create a monopoly in relation to other groups (Weeden 2002), or professional demarcations (Suddaby, Cooper and Greenwood 2007). Spies are certainly a closed profession, but not strictly in the Weberian sense (Macdonald 1985; Weber 1933/1978; Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd 2003), that is they do not keep ‘the ineligibles’ out for fear of losing their share of the market. Their closure is not motivated by the fear of competition. They need to maintain closure to preserve secrecy, as excessive openness to newcomers may cost lives. ‘Loose lips sink ships’ states a poster in the International Spy Museum in Washington. That is why spies are a closed club, and this is why they preserve personal distance even within the profession.

A review of literature on the professions suggests an increased interest in the topics of trust as one of the key aspects of the fiduciary relationship in the professions (Leicht 2016; Noordegraaf 2020; Golden and Bencherki 2023; Gøtzsche-Astrup et al. 2023). Trust is at the core of relationships between professionals and their clients, patients or beneficiaries in law, finance, medicine, and accounting. Trust is what binds client to lawyer, believer to priest, and patient to doctor (Pellegrino, Veatch and Langan 1991). Furthermore, trust also plays an important role in relationships between members of professional groups. Research on intelligence and national security professionals similarly highlights the importance of trust within intelligence community and between intelligence profession and the users of the intelligence (Hansen 2012; Mcdermott and Bar-Joseph 2016; Oomens et al. 2023). But in the context of the spies, distrust appears to be present in this relationship too, but it is rarely discussed. The literature on the professions in general and on intelligence work in particular, has largely ignored the role of distrust even though distrust is not uncommon in the professional work. Our analysis of the articles published in the Journal of Professions and Organizations and the intelligence-specific journal Intelligence and National Security showed that distrust was very rarely mentioned (examples include: Leicht 2016; Oomens et al. 2023). We argue that gaining a better understanding of trust and distrust dynamic may illuminate some of the behaviors of people in other professions such as tax inspectors, undercover policemen, and auditors. To this end, we ask the following question—how do spies navigate the trust/distrust dynamic in their professional work?

Based on our analysis of this extreme context, we contribute some insights into trust and distrust in the professions and, crucially, into how trust and distrust can co-exist in one relationship—a puzzle that has troubled a number of researchers. We argue that trust and distrust co-exist because they have different functions: trust can be used as an instrument of manipulation (we refer to it as weaponized trust) and an option of last resort, while distrust is a protective mechanism aimed at shielding from vulnerability. Maneuvering between trust and distrust lies at the heart of spy craft. So even though distrust appears to be the organizing principle of the profession, trust also plays an important role. Spies might be an extreme example, but we believe that some parallels can be drawn between the world of espionage and other professions.

We start our article with a brief introduction on trust and distrust in the professions. We then zoom in on the conceptualizations of trust and distrust in management literature in the belief that these conceptualizations will enable us to draw lessons from our study. After outlining the methodology underpinning our study, we discuss our findings.

**TRUST AND DISTRUST IN THE PROFESSIONS**

Trust is at the core of the professions and as a concept featured in the classic studies (Freidson 1970; Parsons 1975; Luhmann 1979; Abbott 1988; Giddens 1990). Traditionally, the professions were granted permission to put in place systems and processes that enabled their clients to trust the professional self-controls (Noordegraaf 2007). Freidson (1970) emphasized the uniqueness of the professions as they occupied the ‘high-trust’ positions and are not under continuous supervision or control of management. Similarly, a British sociologist Alan Fox (1974) observed that the professions are normally ‘high-discretion’ groups characterized by high trust, self-discipline, and high autonomy, in contrast to low-discretion jobs, which require greater control of the individual worker who had less reason to trust their employers. In other words, low-discretion work roles were symptomatic of low trust dynamics, while the professions enjoyed trust and autonomy in the society.

Researchers studying the professions usually consider interpersonal trust placed in individual professionals alongside a broader view of a profession as an abstract system (Luhmann 1979; Giddens 1990). They ask—if
we trust a doctor to prescribe medication, do we trust the doctor as a person, or do we trust the healthcare system with its checks and balances (Brown and Calnan 2016)? The answer is—probably both. We do not normally know enough about the doctor to judge his/her expertise, but we trust in the system of professional control and that allows us to take the leap of faith required for trust (Six 2018). Kramer (1999) calls it role-based trust, which is predicated on knowledge that a person occupies a certain role in the organization. So our understanding of the social systems of professional expertise, training, and ongoing regulation of practice helps us adopt an attitude that overlooks risk. However, Giddens (1990) reminds us that ‘the face work’ (when we meet the professional in person) is also important because it is the individuals who function as the access points to the system.

Trust is the key organizing principle in (1) interactions between professionals, (2) between professionals and their clients/stakeholders, and (3) between professionals and organizations (e.g. Baxter 2008; Leicht 2016; Mcdermott and Bar-Joseph 2016; Noordegraaf 2020; Golden and Bencheri 2023; Götzsche-Astrup et al. 2023). Being considered trustworthy and trusted by stakeholders is instrumental in ensuring the legitimacy of the professions (Whittle, Mueller and Carter 2016). Götzsche-Astrup et al. (2023) demonstrated how trust leads to better collaboration across professions and that high trust depends on the similarity of their institutional logic. Others noted that professionals are pivotal as trusted interpreters in an environment characterized by easy access to information (Reed 2007; Leicht 2016). However, while traditionally professionals could rely on their clients’ trust, such default trust in the professions was recently challenged by society and increasing scrutiny of professional work (Brown and Calnan 2016). In such an environment, professionals need to earn and actively build trust (Noordegraaf 2020).

Although some professions require a healthy degree of distrust, research on distrust in the professions is scarce. Distrust is sometimes raised in the context of ever-increasing managerial control of the professionals. Six (2018: 367) noted that ‘when you trust you cannot control; and when you control you cannot trust. Controls are seen as signs of distrust’. For example, audit of the professions generates distrust of professional competence (Flynn 2002), while managerialism in general is a form of control based on organized distrust (Gilbert 2005). One notable study worth mentioning is that of Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette (2015), who looked inside the professions and considered distrust among lawyers. The authors identified the emergence and development of distrust between judges and admins in a court of law. Martin et al. (2021) discussed distrust between medical doctors and hospital managers and noted that excessive managerialism and conflicting logics in healthcare erode good working relationships. Siebert, Machesky and Insall (2015) studied cancer scientists as a professional group and found ever-increasing levels of distrust of other scientists caused by the ‘overflow’ in science publishing.

Surprisingly, research on trust and distrust in the intelligence community is biased towards the former; primarily focusing on trust building (Hansen 2012) and trust violations (Smeets 2020). Hansen (2012) argued for greater and more conscious reflexivity and self-awareness in the intelligence community, while Smeets (2020) commented on the lack of transparency undermining trust between agencies such as U.S. Cyber Command and allied networks. Other research studies identify classic strategies and stratagems that assist spies in establishing and leveraging trust with their adversaries. For instance, a Chinese classic of strategy, the ‘Thirty-Six Stratagems’ includes a tactic titled ‘Inflict Injury on oneself to Win the Enemy’s Trust’ (Musco 2016). Similarly, Oomens et al. (2023) analyzed four distinct viewpoints held by professionals in the Dutch intelligence community regarding intelligence powers, and identified a degree of suspicion and distrust towards intelligence services as a result of scandals and law-breaking.

Goffman threw some light on interactions between spies and the duplicity behind them. In Strategic Interactions, Goffman (1969: 4) defined strategic interaction as ‘the individual’s capacity to acquire, reveal, and conceal information’. His analysis was written from the perspective of ‘an organizationally committed observer’ who needs information from another person. Consequently, Goffman classified a number of ‘basic moves’ that spies can engage in when interacting with other spies. Unwitting and naïve moves are about taking the ‘subject’ as he or she appears. A control move is aimed at producing expressions that might improve the agent’s situation when they are gleaned by the observer. An uncovering move is about treating what appears to be an unwitting move as deliberate obfuscation and misrepresentation. Finally, a counter-uncovering move is aimed at ‘countering action aimed at masking one’s own action appreciating that their controls might be penetrated’. A counter-uncovering move is based on the observer suspecting the subject and ‘trying to seek out means of piercing the veil’ (Goffman 1969: 20). The best advantage for the subject, according to Goffman, ‘is to give the observer a false sense of having an advantage’. Goffman’s classification suggests that the relationships among spies are more complicated than meets the eye, and that distrust is ever-present.
In order to zoom in on the trust-distrust dynamic in the profession we chose to study, we need to delve deeper into trust-distrust scholarship.

TRUST AND DISTRUST

Trust is commonly defined in terms of the trustor’s willingness to be vulnerable and positive expectations (e.g. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998). Conversely, distrust involves the trustor’s unwillingness to be vulnerable and (pervasive) negative perceptions and expectations (e.g. Lewicki and Tomlinson 2003; Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette 2015). Trust scholars endorse the idea that trust is essential for cultivating positive relationships and is generally beneficial (e.g. McEvily and Zaheer 2006; Nielsen 2011; Fulmer and Gelfand 2012; Nikolova, Möllering and Reihlen 2015). The most frequently cited benefits of trust include improved productivity, increased commitment, greater cooperation, higher staff satisfaction, positive employee relations, knowledge integration and more significant competitive advantage, functioning of the society, and more (Luhmann 1979; Tzafir 2005; Colquitt, Scott and LePine 2007). However, while research on trust often emphasized the benefits of trust, too much trust can also be detrimental (Patzelt and Shepherd 2008; Skinner, Dietz and Weibel 2014; Stevens, MacDuffie and Helper 2015). Consequences of too much trust include inflexibility, overconfidence, decreased motivation to negotiate and monitor the other party, a continuation of nonproductive relationships, exposure to partner’s opportunism, misplaced judgments of the intentions of the partner, and more (e.g. Patzelt and Shepherd 2008; Skinner, Dietz and Weibel 2014).

The relationship between trust and distrust still puzzles researchers. Traditionally, trust and distrust have been considered to be the opposite ends of a single continuum (e.g. Deutsch 1958; Schoorman, Mayer and Davis 2007). More recently, research highlighted conceptual distinctions between trust and distrust (e.g. Lewicki, McAllister and Bies 1998; Dimoka 2010; Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette 2015; Lumineau 2017). There is some empirical evidence for the conceptual distinction between trust and distrust, including their antecedents and consequences (e.g. Sitkin and Roth 1993; Lewicki, McAllister and Bies 1998; Lewicki and Tomlinson 2003; Dimoka 2010; Chang and Fang 2013; Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette 2015; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018; Kostis, Bengtsson and Näsholm 2022; Six and Latusek 2023). Researchers have repeatedly shown that key antecedents of distrust include value incongruence (e.g. Sitkin and Roth 1993; Sitkin and Stickel 1996; Chambers and Melnyk 2006; Tomlinson and Lewicki 2006) or value-mismatch (Six and Latusek 2023). Research has also shown how negative reciprocity and amplifying attributions are integral to distrust (e.g. Sitkin and Roth 1993; Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette 2015). Dimoka (2010) found evidence that trust and distrust activate different brain areas. Finally, theoretical studies suggest that the elements within the institutional context fostering trust might vary distinctly from those contributing to the alleviation of distrust (Cook, Hardin and Levi 2005; Guo, Lumineau and Lewicki 2017; Lumineau 2017). The negative cycle triggered by distrust is more intense and emotionally charged compared with the cycle associated with trust, as indicated by Lewicki and Bunker (1996), McKnight and Chervany (2001), and Zand (1972). To sum up, a number of researchers argue that trust and distrust are conceptually distinct.

However, it is still not clear if trust and distrust can co-exist in the same relationship. The foundational premise for the inability of the co-existence of trust and distrust lies in the notion of the pervasive nature of distrust, which is often rooted in value incongruence between parties in a relationship (Sitkin and Roth 1993; Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette 2015). Distrust is encompassing; once present, it becomes an interpretative lens that spills across the boundaries of relational aspects, leading to a general distrust in the trustee. Where there is widespread distrust, there is no room for trust.

In contrast to this approach, an emerging stream of research suggests that trust and distrust can co-exist. Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998) noted that ‘[…] it is possible for parties to both trust and distrust one another, given different experiences within the various facets of complex interpersonal relationships’ and that ‘just as it is possible… to like and dislike and to love and hate, it may be possible to trust and distrust others’ (1998: 449). Thus Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998) model of trust and distrust incorporates ambivalence (i.e. the simultaneous presence of trust and distrust) and multiplex relationships (i.e. domain-specific co-existence of trust and distrust).

In light of the dearth of studies of trust/distrust dynamics in the professions, we designed a study of spies. We now proceed to explain the methodology underpinning the study.

METHODS

We chose to focus on spies because they are an extreme case of a profession where trust and distrust appear in the most extreme forms and have the most severe consequences; too much trust and too much distrust can cost
lives. Also, espionage relationships offer fruitful ground to investigate trust and distrust because they involve interdependence, high levels of uncertainty, and high degree of vulnerability.

Unsurprisingly, there are very few studies of spies as a profession, and the existing studies rely on archival work involving the analysis of declassified material (e.g. Grey 2012). Although secret service organizations are not themselves secret, and each country has them, quite often we do not know who works for them.

**Data collection**

Conducting a field study was not possible due to ethical concerns and also safety concerns, both for us and our interviewees. We recognized that spies are sworn to secrecy and are not allowed to reveal any classified information, hence any interviews would have had limitations. This led us to a decision to focus on biographies and autobiographies, which meant that we studied representations of spy work rather than spy work itself. There is now a well-established tradition in social science research that relies on the study of biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs. Adamson and Johansson (2021), Brewis and Godfrey (2018), and Rhodes and Parker (2008) in their studies provide a convincing defense of this approach. These authors argue that biographies and autobiographies contain discourses that circulate in the public domain ‘performing a complex kind of cultural work’ (Gilmore 1994: 23). These discourses normalize particular cultural meanings and then become part of the cultural imagination (Adamson and Johansson 2021).

Appreciative of the strengths of studying biographies and autobiographies, we were aware of this method’s limitations. The selection of material and handling of it was a subjective exercise, but the accounts of spies’ lives are subjective and to a degree fictional rather than factual representations of spy work (Gilmore 1994). It is not necessary to read these works as ‘authentic personal narratives’ but more as a form of cultural discourse (Adamson and Johansson 2021: 491). Also, the multiple layers of secrecy surrounding spies’ work at times force omissions, restrictions, and exclusions. We remained aware of these during our analysis as well as of other risks such as the possible criticisms of unreliability of memory, censorship, the constraint of the Official Secrets’ Act, and tendency to heroic rendering of events. After all, a spy is employed to engage in deception; he or she is employed to lie for a living, and there is always going to be an element of omission or deception in biographies and autobiographies. Interviews with spies would have been subject to the same criticism.

We initially identified 48 books to ensure geographical representation (the countries the spies spied for), gender balance (there were significantly more male spies in the sample than female spies), and historical period (World War I, World War II, Cold War, 1980s/1990s). Out of the longlist of 48, we selected 10 books (see Table 1 for more details, we also list these in the References with an asterisk). We decided to focus on these 10 biographies and autobiographies for the following reasons. Firstly, they provided the richest descriptions of spy work from the perspective of interpersonal relationships. Secondly, we chose biographers known for diligence in researching source materials and providing rich accounts of events and situations based on comprehensive archival material involving accounts of numerous people as well as memoirs and letters of the spies themselves. This is why the works by Ben Macintyre feature heavily in the proceeding analysis—the biographies authored by him are comprehensive sources based on extensive archival research. Macintyre’s work offers detailed descriptions akin to thick description in ethnographic research (Geertz 1973) of the interpersonal dynamics of trust and distrust among spies, which is more comprehensive than that found in other books we analyzed. Although other biographers offered some insights into trust and distrust in the world of spies, Macintyre’s accounts provided the most fruitful ground for analysis.

**Data analysis**

We read selected books while simultaneously coding material that we found relevant to our study. We drew on pertinent trust and distrust models (e.g. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998; Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette 2015; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018) to identify trust- and distrust-relevant material and themes (i.e. top-down coding). Additionally, we employed principles of open coding, a form of inductive coding (Charmaz 2006) to remain receptive to new theoretical possibilities. We drew on two widely accepted definitions of trust by Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) and Rousseau et al. (1998) and used they key elements of these definitions to identify trust references: ‘the willingness of a party to be vulnerable’, ‘positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another party’, or ‘a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability’. We coded text that corresponded to these definitions. In other words, trust and distrust definitions and models provided us with a theoretical lens that helped us identify relevant material. We also open-coded numerous sections and created more emergent codes. We organized and condensed open codes by comparing them with each other and with theoretical themes from trust and distrust literature. Examples of our emergent codes include familiarity, friendship, breach of trust,
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<td>The Terminal Spy: A True Story of Espionage, Betrayal and Murder</td>
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<td>Nigel West and Madoc Roberts.</td>
<td>Snow: The Double Life of a World War II Spy</td>
<td>Arthur Owens</td>
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<td>WWII</td>
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<td>Biography</td>
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<td>Nigel West</td>
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<td>Juan Pujol Garcia</td>
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<td>Phillip Knightley</td>
<td>Philby: The Life and Views of the K.G.B. Masterspy</td>
<td>Kim Philby</td>
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### Table 1. Continued

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<th>Author</th>
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<th>Historical period</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<td>Dusan Popov</td>
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<td><em>William Stevenson</em></td>
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<td>William Stephenson</td>
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need to know, suspicion, fear of deception, co-existence of trust and distrust, betrayal, psychological games, dishonest behavior, and so on. Themes from the literature that we also found in the biographies and autobiographies included trustworthiness, consequences of trust, antecedents of trust, etc. As our analysis progressed and we learned more about this negative aspect of trust, we realized that a common thread across these codes was the notion that actor A took advantage of a trustful actor B, leading to negative consequences for actor B. This led us to formulate a theme of ‘weaponized trust’. We arrived at our other themes by following the same analytical process. Our coding facilitated the integration of relevant data across all analyzed works. During our coding process, we generated written memos (Charmaz 2006) in which we documented our analytical ideas related to our themes, as well as recorded exemplary illustrations associated with those themes. This procedure eventually helped us identify six trust and distrust dynamics captured in our analytical themes.

**FINDINGS**

In this section, we introduce six main themes on trust and distrust dynamics in espionage relationships that emerged from our analysis. Table 2 in the Discussion provides a summary of the main themes and a brief outline of implications for the study of the professions.

**Trust based on familiarity**

The extreme secrecy imposed by the nature of the espionage work demanded that the members of the secret service were not allowed to tell their friends, partners, parents, or children what they did for a living—a perfect example of social closure in action. Living a life of deception had its toll on them, and the only opportunity to drop guard was with the only people a spy could trust—other spies. The 1950s and 1960s accounts of MI5 and MI6 espionage suggest that a circle of complete trust was formed—a social circle of spies who relaxed together, drank together, and talked openly about life and work; the circle of trust at work became their ‘family’ and a ‘closed clique, bound by shared secrets others must never know’ (Macintyre 2015: 25). Trust between spies was rooted in familiarity and friendship between spies. Within this community of spies, they trusted one another completely, as a biographer commented on Nicholas Elliott’s (MI6 intelligence officer in the Cold War period) social environment in MI6:

In the civilian world, Elliott never breathed a word about his job. But inside the secular monastery that is MI6 (...) he was among people he could trust utterly, and speak to openly in a way that was impossible outside. ‘It was an organisation in which a large proportion of one’s colleagues, male and female, were personal friends,’ wrote Elliott. ‘A sort of convivial camaraderie prevailed, rather like a club, in which we all called each other by our first names, and saw a lot of one another outside the office.’ (Macintyre 2015: 25)

This suggests that no matter how distrustful, spies allowed themselves to be indiscreet in this closed circle, like Kim Philby (British intelligence officer and double agent for the Soviet Union) who ‘mixed with the cream of the secret services, people intensely secretive outside this charmed circle, and so indiscreet inside it’ (Macintyre 2015: 102). What was known to one would be known to all—the biographer noted (Macintyre 2015). The complete trust within the spy circle had its appeal—the ‘intense atmosphere of secretive camaraderie’ (Macintyre 2009: 59) was said to be a magnet for Eddie Chapman (British double agent during the Second World War, codenamed Zigzag) when he was working as a British double agent in Germany.

What this circle of select few shared was not only the secret, but also the social and cultural background. In the 1950s and 1960s, the secret service was an elite club, and belonging to certain groups was a proxy for trust. According to Macintyre (2015: 229), ‘British snobbery and prejudice may have played a part in selecting who could belong to the MI6 club’.

British spies at the time had a lot in common—they shared a privileged background, good financial standing, and Oxford or Cambridge education, as was the case with Elliott and Philby:

Elliott (...) when he was befriended and beguiled by Philby, a man he had then trusted, revered and supported throughout his adult life. Their lives had seemed to run in tandem, through public school, Cambridge and MI6, overlapping professionally, culturally and geographically. (Macintyre 2015: 244)

In addition to the shared background between spies, trust between them was also rooted in familiarity. For example, recruitment into the secret service organization was by means of the tap on the shoulder—literally or metaphorically—all within the social club:

To enter the espionage network you need to go through people that know you. This normally means that you share the same background like elite schools, clubs, etc. For example, Nicholas Elliott arranged to
Table 2 Trust/distrust themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Related concepts and contributions</th>
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| Trust based on familiarity   | - Antecedents of trust in professional settings  
- Importance of personal ties, shared social and cultural capital, homophily in recruitment of the professionals  
- Closed club/clique, social closure  
- Shared privileged background  
- Homophily  

Contribution to the literature on trust in the profession and social capital (Noordegraaf 2007, 2020; Leicht 2016; Gøtzsche-Astrup et al. 2023)

| Weaponized trust             | - Trust used as a means of exploiting vulnerability  
- Deception and betrayal in friendship  
- Capacity to make friends as a powerful weapon to defend oneself against the suspicion of treason  
- Excessive trust is linked with severe negative consequences  

Contribution to the literature on the dark side of trust (e.g. Patzelt and Shepherd 2008; Skinner, Dietz and Weibel 2014).

| Co-existence of trust and distrust | - Two constructs can exist simultaneously within the same relationship  
- Complexity of cognitive and affective factors  

Contribution to the literature on trust and distrust (Lewicki, McAllister and Bies 1998; Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Antoinette 2015; Lumineau 2017; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018)

| Trading in trust             | - Figuring out who to trust as part of the job  
- Strategic interaction—the individual's capacity to acquire, reveal, and conceal information (Goffman 1970)  
- Intuition and training in making trust judgements  

Contributes to the study of signals of trustworthiness (Möllering 2006; Six 2018)

| From leap of faith to calculated trust | - Trust in extreme circumstances and in the face of extreme vulnerability  
- 'Trust games'—elaborate game of give and take  

Contributes to the study of leap of faith and calculated trust (Möllering 2006; Nikolova, Möllering and Reihlen 2015)

| Paranoia of distrust         | - The paranoia of distrust is linked to chronic doubt  
- The paranoia stemming from distrust is associated with severe negative personal and organizational consequences  
- Excessive distrust hinders organizational functioning  

Contribution to the study of organizational culture and negative consequences of distrust (see Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018; Six and Latusek 2023)

meet ‘Van’ at Ascot and, over drinks, mentioned that he thought he might like to join the intelligence service. Sir Robert Vansittart smiled and replied: ‘I am relieved you have asked me for something so easy.’ So that,” Elliott wrote, many years later, ‘was that.’ The Old Boy recruitment network had worked perfectly. (Macintyre 2015: 3)

Similarly, the vetting of Kim Philby in MI6 involved asking around among those who knew his family:

Valentine Vivian, the deputy head of MI6, who had known Philby’s father when they were both colonial officials in India, was prepared to vouch personally for the new recruit, giving what may be the quintessential
definition of Britain’s Old Boy network: ‘I was asked about him, and said I knew his people.’ (Macintyre 2015: 20)

Social closure in the form of membership of ‘the club’ meant that a third-party’s perceptions and judgments were used as a guarantee of trust more than the security precautions, adding support to the notion of trust transferability (Ferrin, Dirks and Shah 2006). And of course, within the club, there was still room for betrayal. Elliott trusted his friend with his secrets and those secrets were being put to murderous use:

Elliott and Philby existed within the inner circle of Britain’s ruling class, where mutual trust was so absolute and unquestioned that there was no need for elaborate security precautions. They were all part of the same family. ‘For centuries the Office had operated on trust,’ said George Carey Foster, the Foreign Office security officer. ‘In that family atmosphere they couldn’t conceive that there was a wrong ‘un among them.’ Elliott trusted his wife to keep a secret; Elliott’s employer trusted his father to keep a secret; and Elliott trusted his friend Philby to keep his secrets, never suspecting that those secrets were now being put to murderous use. (Macintyre 2015: 86)

The ‘clubbiness’ in the KGB was less explicit, though still family history was a proxy for trust; a good KGB father suggested a likelihood of a trustworthy KGB son. Social bonding in workplace circles was also used as a mechanism to build trust once a candidate was recruited. Oleg Gordievsky’s (KGB agent, double agent providing information to MI6) preparation for his work for the KGB involved being sent on holiday with his colleague Standa Kaplan to bond while talking about women, music, and politics; however, ironically the politics over which they bonded was the opposite of what the KGB intended—the two spies bonded over their anti-Soviet convictions.

The two friends would soon be colleagues, allies in espionage on behalf of the Soviet bloc. For a month, they camped under the pines, ran every day, swam, sunbathed, and discussed women, music, and politics. Kaplan was increasingly critical of the communist system. Gordievsky was flattered to be the recipient of such dangerous confidences: ‘There was an understanding between us, a trust.’ (Macintyre 2019: 17)

Affinity between spies was often built on shared cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986)—in the case of Gordievsky and his KGB colleague Lyubimov—it was the knowledge of history, classical music, and expensive whisky:

Gordievsky took to Lyubimov immediately. ‘It is not the winning that counts but playing the game,’ Lyubimov boomed, as he regaled the younger man with tales of his life in Britain, recruiting spies while sipping Glenlivet in panelled clubrooms. Lyubimov adopted Gordievsky as his protégé, and said of the younger man: ‘He impressed me with his splendid knowledge of history. He loved Bach and Haydn, which inspired respect, particularly compared to the rest of the Soviet colony in Denmark, who spent all their time on fishing trips, shopping, and amassing as many material possessions as they could.’ (Macintyre 2019: 28)

Shared cultural capital also played a part in interpersonal communication. The spies conveyed messages by passing literary texts to each other in the trust that the recipient would decode the message:

Gordievsky switched subject. ‘Have you read “Mr Harrington’s Washing” by Somerset Maugham?’ (…) Gordievsky knew that his friend owned the complete works. ‘It’s very good. You should read it again,’ said Gordievsky. ‘It’s in Volume Four. Look it up, and you’ll see what I mean.’ After some more chat, they rang off. Gordievsky had just planted a coded farewell to Lyubimov, and an unambiguous literary clue: ‘Mr Harrington’s Washing’ is the tale of a British spy who escapes from revolutionary Russia through Finland. (Macintyre 2019: 269–70)

Weaponized trust

Most espionage relationships began not with politics, but with friendship. The biographies we studied zoom in on friendship—as a means of support, a means to gain intel, and sometimes in the context of betrayal. In fact, the capacity for friendship seems to be one of the key characteristics in a spy and a powerful weapon with which they defend themselves against the suspicion of treason:

Philby had one other weapon in his armoury, perhaps the most powerful of all, and that was his capacity for friendship. Philby had powerful friends on both sides of the Atlantic, people who had worked with him and trusted him for many years. These people had witnessed his skill as an intelligence officer, shared secrets with him and drunk his Martinis. To accept Philby’s guilt would have been, in a way, to implicate themselves. ‘There must be many people in high positions,’ Philby reflected, ‘who would wish very much to see my
innocence established. They would be inclined to give me the benefit of the doubt.’ (Macintyre 2015: 154)

Similarly, Nicholas Elliott had a great capacity for making friends and the establishment of personal relationships, which was his modus operandi in intelligence work:

Elliott set about making friends with the sort of people who would have made his father shudder. In later years, he wrote that ‘the capacity for friendship is a particularly important characteristic’ in an intelligence officer. ‘A large amount of intelligence work in the field is all about the establishment of personal relationships; of gaining other people’s confidence and on some occasions persuading people to do something against their better judgement.’ (Macintyre 2015: 63)

One of the most painful stories is that of Nicholas Elliott. Far from doubting him, Elliott trusted Philby completely, and his determination to employ him to the full reflected Elliott’s ‘overt and innocent friendship’ (Macintyre 2015: 219), and an admiration stretching back 20 years. And in the friendship the breaches of trust happened: ‘No one likes to admit they have been utterly conned. The truth was simpler, as it almost always is: Philby was spying on everyone, and no one was spying on him, because he fooled them all’ (Macintyre 2015: 226).

Morley (2017), in the biography of James Angleton (the American Chief of Counterintelligence in the CIA), also reported that Philby was adept at spy games—the greater the trust between Angleton and Philby, the less people would suspect covert action. Le Carré (real name David Cornwell, author and British intelligence officer; 2016) returned to the story of friendship between Philby and Elliott and the utter pain of betrayal: ‘No amount of the caustic levity that was his stock-in-trade was going to take away the pain of knowing that the man to whom he had unreservedly entrusted his most intimate personal and professional secrets had, from the very first day of their long friendship, betrayed him to the Soviet enemy’ (le Carré 2016: 178).

Kim Philby himself admitted to the elaborate game of trust in friendship with James Angleton, the American Chief of Counterintelligence in the CIA, and how being trusted gained him enormous advantage in being above suspicion. Trust, again, was used as a tool to extract secrets from the ‘nominal employer’ and pass them on to the ‘actual’ employer:

‘Our close association was, I am sure, inspired by genuine friendliness,’ wrote Philby. ‘But we both had ulterior motives ... By cultivating me to the full, he could better keep me under wraps. For my part, I was more than content to string him along. The greater the trust between us overtly, the less he would suspect covert action. Who gained most from this complex game I cannot say. But I had one big advantage. I knew what he was doing for CIA and he knew what I was doing for SIS. But the real nature of my interest was something he did not know.’ (Macintyre 2015: 132–3)

Similarly, Gordievsky used his friendship—Lyubimov was a patron, adviser, ally, and close friend but also he was a prime source of intelligence:

Lyubimov might be ‘a friend for life’, but he was also a prime source of intelligence. Everything Gordievsky gleaned from him was passed back to MI6, (…) The friendship was also a betrayal. Lyubimov later reflected: ‘Oleg Gordievsky was playing me like a penny whistle.’ (Macintyre 2019: 85)

Like all the other spies, Gordievsky had to be capable of emotional deception:

Yet this honesty demanded emotional deception, fraud in a virtuous cause, a sacred duplicity. He was telling MI6 every secret truth he could find, while lying to his colleagues and his bosses, his family, his best friend, his estranged wife and his new lover. (Macintyre 2019: 86)

Angleton was said to have been crushed by Philby’s betrayal: ‘[he] was his friend, his mentor, his confidant, his boozy buddy. And through every meeting, conference, debriefing, confidential aside, and cocktail party, his friend had played him for a fool’ (Morley 2017).

Secrets appeared to be the currency of intelligence work—and friendship was the fertile ground for such trading:

Secrets are the currency of intelligence work, and among professional spies a little calculated indiscretion raises the exchange rate. Philby took to passing on titbits to selected colleagues, off the record, and they would respond in kind. As Philby put it: ‘The rewards of such unorthodoxy were often generous.’ A secret shared was a friend made, and friendship, or its simulacrum, was the best way to extract more secrets. (Macintyre 2015: 51)

In the world of spies, everything is more extreme—the colors are brighter, the dangers more real, the consequences of actions are more severe, and the weight
of trust is heavier. Spies used trust to collect intel, but they sometimes find too much trust placed in them burdensome. One of the spies in Chapman's biography was reported to say: 'From now on this man's life is in your hands. It is absolutely essential that no word of his mission should become known to the crew' (Macintyre 2009: 191–2). Chapman knew the weight of trust placed in him, and this trust weighed heavy on him. He longed to tell the truth to his woman, but knew that the truth would kill them both (Macintyre 2009). And Chapman was the one who actually broke the veil of secrecy several times—not because he wanted to betray his employer, but because he was desperate to tell the truth.

Gordievsky and Philby coped with the burden of trust placed on them, and could keep secrets away from their women. Gordievsky concealed the truth about his identity from his wives: Leila and Yelena. Philby did not tell his wife Aileen that he worked for MI6, not to mention his actual allegiance to the KGB.

The relationship between the spy and their handler is particularly interesting from the perspective of weaponizing trust. The relationship, technically, closely resembles the line management arrangement in 'standard' organizations, but the biographies often depict it as a close personal relationship, involving a degree of affection but based on duplicity. The handler manipulated the spy into believing that he was loved and trusted. Deutsch, Kim Philby's handler, made a careful study of the spy's psychology, and concluded that Philby needed 'constant encouragement': 'The fatal conceit of most spies is to believe that they are loved, in a relationship between equals, and not merely manipulated' (Macintyre 2015: 42–3).

Macintyre returns to the theme of the handler's love for the spy in several biographies—Gordievsky's, Philby's, and Chapman's—and adds that the handlers were simply exploiting and manipulating that hunger for affection and affirmation:

All spies need to feel they are loved. One of the most powerful forces in espionage and intelligence work (and one of its central myths) is the emotional bond between spy and spymaster, agent and handler. Spies want to feel wanted, part of a secret community, rewarded, trusted and cherished. (... ) Exploiting and manipulating that hunger for affection and affirmation is one of the most important skills of an agent-runner. There has never been a successful spy who did not feel that the connection with his handler was something more profound than a marriage of convenience, politics or profit: a true, enduring communion, amid the lies and deception. (Macintyre 2019: 65)

Similarly, Philby was bonded, ideologically and emotionally, to his Soviet handler: 'I sometimes felt we had been friends since childhood', he wrote. 'I was certain that my life and myself interested him not so much professionally as on a human level' (Macintyre 2015: 42).

The picture emerging from these accounts is that of affection amidst deception. This illusion of love is used by the handlers to maintain trust: 'The essence of espionage is betrayal of trust', Ames declared. He was wrong: 'the essence of successful agent-running is the maintenance of trust, the supplanting of one allegiance by another, higher, loyalty' (Macintyre 2019: 126).

**Trust and distrust at the same time**

Counter-intuitively, emotional deception did not seem to detract from the value of friendship—one of the most striking paradoxes of trust between spies. Although Elliott felt betrayed by his best friend Philby, he treasured his 'memories of a man with a spark that drew people to him' (Macintyre 2015: 286) and was always fond of him:

Long-suffering and loyal, Elliott put up with Philby's outbursts. Philby leaned heavily on his old friend. In his strange double world, there was no contradiction here: he genuinely valued Elliott's friendship, needed his support and relied on his advice, while lying to him. (Macintyre 2015: 174).

One of the most insightful moments of the duplicity of Goffman's *counter-uncovering* move is in the description when 'two middle-aged spies are sitting in an apartment in the Christian Quarter, sipping tea and lying courteously to one another, as evening approaches' (Macintyre 2015: 1). They trusted and distrusted each other at the same time. A similar example of the combined trickery and tenderness inherent in espionage was evident in Eddie Chapman's relationship with his German handler, where Chapman's affection was undimmed by the months of betraying him:

'Thank God you are back,' said Von Gröning. 'He appeared really moved.' As for Chapman, he was genuinely delighted to see 'the old man', his affection undimmed by the months he had spent betraying him, and his intention to continue doing so. (Macintyre 2009: 224).

Stella Rimington, the former boss of MI5, in her autobiography, refers to the co-existence of trust and distrust at the organizational level. She noted that there is indeed a need to maintain absolute secrecy (i.e. distrust). Since everyone, even at the bottom of organizational hierarchy, has access to some secret information, which could...
cause damage if leaked, so rigorous and intrusive security checks are necessary. However, Stella Rimington made a case for trust—she wrote in her autobiography: ‘It is important to avoid any sense of mutual suspicion. On the contrary, what must be generated is mutual trust and loyalty, because the success of any operation depends on teams working closely together, and people’s lives may be in the hands of their colleagues (Rimington 2002). Without some degree of trust organizations simply cannot function, Rimington argued.

Trading in trust
Figuring out who to trust and who to distrust was a skill that spies appeared to possess. ‘What a tangled web we we weave when first we practice to deceive. But when you’ve practiced quite a bit you really get quite good at it,’ were the words by Elliott recounted by Philby’s biographer (Macintyre 2015: 14). Some of the most powerful descriptions in the biographies of spies are when the Goffmanesque element of the strategic interaction is captured—the individual’s capacity to acquire, reveal, and conceal information (Goffman 1969). One such example was the meeting of Gordievsky and his long-term friend Kaplan when only the slight tremor in Kaplan’s hand on the whisky glass suggested to Gordievsky that his friend was lying, and the purpose of his visit was to make him cross the line to ‘the other side’:

Gordievsky poured his old friend a whisky, and introduced him to Yelena. Kaplan explained that he was now working for a Canadian insurance company. He had come to Copenhagen to see a Danish girlfriend, found Oleg’s name in the diplomatic list, and decided on a whim to look him up. Kaplan seemed unchanged, the same open face and jaunty manner. But a slight tremor in the hand on the whisky glass betrayed him. Gordievsky knew he was lying. Kaplan had been sent by a Western intelligence service. (Macintyre 2019: 49)

Spies traded in trust and they used it as one of the oldest gambits in intelligence, referred to as ‘the dangle,’ when one side appears to make a play for someone on the other, lures them into complicity and gains his trust before exposing them (Macintyre 2019), and over his lifetime of espionage, Gordievsky was said to develop a knack for ‘detecting loyalty, suspicion, conviction and faith’ (Macintyre 2019: 251). The decision whether to trust or not to trust appeared to be based on the mixture of intuition and training (Möllering 2006):

‘My suspicious mind was unable to accept this man at face value. My instinct was telling me that he was a remarkably nice person and I could trust him. My training and experience of KGB officers, on the other hand, was screaming caution.’ Another marker had been put down, and both knew it. ‘All at once we were almost colleagues,’ wrote Gordievsky. ‘At last we began to speak in plain language.’ (Macintyre 2019: 57).

Four of Goffman’s strategies rely on not accepting anything at face value, and the spy interactions in the sources we analyzed also reflect that principle. Gordievsky’s interactions with an MI5 agent Spencer were based on this ‘combined trickery of tenderness’:

The relationship between Gordievsky and Spencer [she was MI5 access agent] became a solid friendship, but it was also one of deception. She believed she was deceiving him; and he was deceiving her by allowing her to think that. He was using her to improve his standing with the KGB. She thought she was striking a blow against the Soviet Union. Here was another example of the combined trickery and tenderness inherent in espionage: a friendship between a British Tory researcher and a Russian Soviet diplomat, both of whom were secret spies. They were lying to each other, with genuine affection. (Macintyre 2019: 160).

Similarly, Philby and Elliott’s friendship reflected some principles of strategic interaction:

Philby knows the game, for he has played it brilliantly for three decades. But he does not know how much Elliott knows. Perhaps the friendship will save him, as it has saved him before. Both men tell some truth, laced with deception, and lie with the force of honest conviction. Layer upon layer, back and forth. (Macintyre 2015: 2).

Le Carré evoked the image of the game of duplicity in his account of spy craft, too:

‘You know far more about it than I do,’ he adds suddenly, looking up. ‘But that’s not true,’ I protest. ‘I’m a novice too. I did the work when I was young and got out thirty years ago. I’ve been living off my wits ever since.’ He draws an arrow. ‘So it’s a game,’ he says. Does he mean I’m a game? Or the spying industry is? He shakes his head, as if to say it doesn’t matter either way.

The tragedy of double agents was that as much as they engaged in the game of trust, sometimes they trusted their employers fully while the employers distrusted them. The account of Philby’s handling by the KGB
neatly illustrates the irony of the trust/distrust dynamic: ‘Philby was telling Moscow the truth, but was disbelieved, and allowed to go on thinking he was believed; he was deceiving the British in order to aid the Soviets, who suspected a deception, and were in turn deceiving him’ (Macintyre 2015: 71–2). It is one of the richer ironies of trust and distrust—a double agent trusts the agency completely while the agency distrusts them completely. Double agents were distrusted far more than anyone else as the fear of a double agent changing sides was always there; consequently, additional checks were made—on Philby by the KGB, on Chapman by MI6, all according to the cliché principle attributed to Lenin: trust is good but control is better. Once someone was known to be a double spy, they were distrusted and a suspicion arose that he/she might be a triple spy, as indeed was the case with Agent Tricycle.

From leap of faith to calculated trust
The analysis of trust/distrust dynamic is most complex in the case of double agents. Approaching an agent of the enemy and inviting him/her to change allegiance is a tricky balancing act, and extremely dangerous. Vulnerability is extremely high in the face of exposure, and in the event of refusal to collaborate, this exposure may lead to the failure of the whole operation. This account of Gordievsky’s recruitment into MI6 illustrates this beautifully—Bromhead admitted that he was an employee of MI6 and that he knew that Gordievsky was a KGB spy. Gordievsky did not deny and agreed to meet—the actions of both men involved extreme vulnerability:

‘Would you be able to talk to me, tête-à-tête? I would love to have a private conversation, some place where we would not be overheard.’ ‘I would like that,’ said Gordievsky. ‘It would be very interesting for me to have that sort of conversation with a member of your service. I think you are one of the few who would speak honestly to me.’ Another line crossed: Bromhead had revealed he knew Gordievsky was a KGB officer. ‘Could we have lunch?’ Bromhead continued. ‘Yes, of course.’ ‘It might be more difficult for you to meet up than for me, so why don’t you name a restaurant that would suit you?’ (Macintyre 2019: 52–3)

During the second meeting, however, Bromhead decided to trust Gordievsky, because he did not tell KGB of the meeting. This was an example of an elaborate calculation: ‘If the KGB discovered he had contacted Bromhead and kept it secret, he was doomed. By informing MI6 that he had told no one, he was making his switch of allegiance perfectly clear, and putting his life in their hands’ (Macintyre 2019: 57–8). MI6 demonstrated calculated trust, while Gordievsky, by agreeing to collaborate, crossed over and put his life in their hands—an act of complete trust at the expense of his honesty towards his estranged wife, his best friend, and his new lover:

Yet this honesty demanded emotional deception, fraud in a virtuous cause, a sacred duplicity. He was telling MI6 every secret truth he could find, while lying to his colleagues and his bosses, his family, his best friend, his estranged wife and his new lover. (Macintyre 2019: 86)

The spy’s past was also taken into account in determining his/her loyalty, and establishing the basis for trust. Chapman’s criminal record worked to his disadvantage, ‘it is difficult to accept that a man who has all his life been an enemy of society should be actuated by any patriotic sentiments’ (Macintyre 2009: 171)—his MI6 recruiters expressed their concern. Chapman’s biographer summed up the calculation: ‘The equation was therefore: Chapman’s life plus the value of his intelligence, minus the possibility that he might turn traitor, fail, or head off on some wild freelance mission’ (Macintyre 2009: 179). Although MI6 learned to trust Eddie Chapman, the organization never trusted him with the most secret of the secrets—the fact that the Abwehr codes were broken by Bletchley Park (Macintyre 2009). The story of Eddie Chapman’s involvement with MI6 is a story of extreme distrust. As his intentions were seen as mercenary, and his focus on financial remuneration was evident, he was more distrusted than others. MI6 could always be out-bid financially by the enemy.

Personal happiness seemed to be related to higher trust. In the case of Eddie Chapman, his misery was seen as dangerous—he desperately missed his woman and his child and MI6 feared that his unhappiness would undermine his loyalty to the British. A happy Chapman, reunited with his fiancée and child in Britain, would be less likely to defect; a happy spy was a more trustworthy spy.

Paranoia of distrust
We already noted that complete or excessive trust is often weaponized which can cost lives, for which history, sadly, provides numerous examples. We also found that too much distrust can be problematic. For example, Stella Rimington, the former boss of MI5 in the UK, in her autobiography discussed the need-to-know principle which, if it worked properly, could save lives but it also limited corroboration of information:
Information was, very properly, held tightly and there was a series of circles within circles. As a newcomer, you were in the very outer circle, but as you carried out your day-to-day tasks you became aware that there were lots of other circles of which you were not a member. From time to time, when I asked for a name to be looked up in the index, to see whether someone already had a file, the answer would come back that I must refer to someone else, as I was not on the relevant list for seeing whatever there was. You knew, when that happened, that either the person you had stumbled upon was an agent, a human source, whose identity was kept very closely guarded, or there was information on the file which revealed some other secret source of information or some operation which you were not allowed to know about. (Rimington 2002: 99-100)

History provides examples of situations where too much distrust led to paranoia. In the 1960s, James Angleton, the chief of counterintelligence in the CIA was convinced that the organization was riddled with Soviet spies, and set about rooting them out, suspecting layer after layer of deception. He even believed that a number of world leaders were under KGB control, including British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, Olof Palme of Sweden, and German Chancellor Willy Brandt. Through his extreme distrust, Angleton inflicted huge damage on the CIA by creating a climate of debilitating suspicion (Macintyre 2015).

Following the discovery of Philby’s betrayal, Angleton distrusted everyone and descended into the wilderness of mirrors:

As America’s premier spy-catcher, he was becoming ‘recognised as the dominant counter-intelligence figure in the non-communist world.’ More gaunt and aloof than ever, Angleton trusted few, and mistrusted most, inspiring a peculiar mixture of awe and fear among his colleagues. (Macintyre 2015: 222)

Angleton’s personality was changed by the realization that he, the top expert in the world on Soviet espionage, had been deceived, and this had a catastrophic effect on him—he found it difficult to trust anybody. His friend Nicholas Elliott believed that Angleton ‘was being devoured by distrust’ (Macintyre 2015: 279–81):

After Philby’s defection a profound and poisonous paranoia seemed to seize him. ‘The emotional wreckage of that close friendship made him distrust everybody and coloured his life from that point on.’ He became convinced that a vast, overarching conspiracy must be taking place under his nose, orchestrated by Philby, from Moscow. (…) In Angleton’s warped logic, if Philby had fooled him, then there must be many other KGB spies in positions of influence in the West. ‘Never again would he permit himself to be so badly duped. He would trust no one.’

Angleton was convinced that the CIA was riddled with Soviet spies and he set about rooting them out. He suspected a number of world leaders of being under KGB control and drew up files on suspect individuals (Macintyre 2015). His paranoia effectively paralyzed CIA operations, eventually leading to accusations of his own espionage for the KGB. The extreme distrust caused massive damage to the CIA.

The ‘trust is good, control is better’ principle caused trouble not only in MI6 but also in other intelligence agencies. The extreme distrust led to the situation where during the Cold War the controllers had to control the controllers—no controller could be trusted (Moltman 2006) and various devices of distrust were used to this end (Siebert and Czarniawska 2020). The Cold War spirit of suspicion created a long-lasting legacy, which Stella Rimington commented on in her autobiography:

There were risks from this Cold War ethos. Firstly, there was a real danger of inefficiency, because information might be so squirreled away behind rings of secrecy that its existence was not known to those who needed it and investigations might be damaged as a result. Secondly, of course, extreme secrecy can lead to paranoia. (Rimington 2002: 100)

Similarly, le Carré (2016) described the atmosphere of mistrust that pervaded Whitehall’s corridors in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a result of the betrayal by the Cambridge Five, even half a century on. The spy-turned novelist reflected on the case of betrayal by George Blake:

The scale of Blake’s betrayal remains, even by the standards of the period, monumental: literally hundreds of British agents—Blake himself could no longer calculate how many—betrayed; covert audio operations deemed vital to the national security, such as, but not exclusively, the Berlin audio tunnel, blown before they were launched; and the entire breakdown of MI6’s personnel, safe houses, order of battle and outstations across the globe. Blake, a most capable field agent in both interests, was also a God-seeker, who by the time of his unmasking had espoused Christianity, Judaism and communism in that order. (le Carré 2016: 21)
The case of betrayal by Philby and Blake especially haunted the secret service organizations—MI6 and the CIA—and led to paranoid distrust that caused damage to the secret service organizations (Macintyre 2015).

DISCUSSION

Our review of the literature on trust and distrust in the professions suggests that there is a dearth of studies into distrust. The decline of trust of the general public in the professions is well documented, and an evolving area of research (Brown and Calnan 2016; Noordegraaf 2020), but distrust of other members of the professions merits further consideration. Rather than providing a new theoretical framework of the trust/distrust dynamic, in this article, we provide some insights into the topic of how professionals, in this case, spies, navigate and experience this dynamic in their professional work. We summarize these insights and our contributions in Table 2. Gaining a better understanding of trust and distrust in the world of the spying profession may open up avenues for research into other professions. Like spies, police officers, tax inspectors, or lawyers are at times required to display a degree of skepticism of other professionals. Can police officers separate their personal friendships from detective investigations? Do they use personal contacts to collect information? Does participation in secret operations affect their personal lives? These are all questions worthy of future inquiry.

On the first glance, the picture emerging from the biographies and autobiographies is that the essence of espionage is the betrayal of trust, so distrust appears to play a crucial role in spy relationships. While distrust has frequently been associated with negative consequences in organizations such as rigidity, excessive skepticism, and increased monitoring, it also has positive effects related to maintaining healthy suspicion, constructive doubt, and vigilance (Lumineau 2017; Kostis, Bengtsson and Näsholm 2022). The biographies and autobiographies we studied provided numerous examples of these effects. We argue that this could be critical in espionage relationships due to severe and possibly deadly consequences among actors in espionage relationships. Distrust helps deal with vulnerability and helps spies to avoid risk. If spies trust too much, they put their lives at risk, in the same way as policemen, detectives or service personnel would. Construed in this way, distrust functions as a shield, a protective device against the threat of betrayal. Such a protective device is needed when managing double agents, who are in principle the ones who have already betrayed one employer for the benefit of another. If the agent deceived their nominal employer, he or she might deceive their new employer, and might become a triple agent. In this tangled web of deception, the organization uses distrust to protect its own interests. These findings support recent findings showing that distrust can be beneficial (e.g. Lumineau 2017; Kostis, Bengtsson and Näsholm 2022).

But trust matters, too. The most striking observation from our analysis is that spies use trust as an instrument of manipulation and deception. There are not many professions that would actually require one to deceive and manipulate for a living, but elements of such practices can be found in detective work, corruption investigation, or investigative journalism. The concept of weaponized trust which we discussed above, contributes to the growing body of literature on the dark facets of trust (e.g. Patzelt and Shepherd 2008; Skinner, Dietz and Weibel 2014).

Weaponized trust used as an instrument of manipulation is unidirectional—through their capacity to make friends and appear trustworthy, spies elicit information or manipulate people. Trust conceived this way is the modus operandi of a spy, an instrument necessary to day-to-day operations. These cases demonstrate two-sidedness of trust (Skinner, Dietz and Weibel 2014). For an agent, trust is beneficial because it helps ensure successful operations. However, it is detrimental to a trustor and can ultimately have deadly consequences.

Trust in the above examples has many faces—it is genuine trust when a spy puts his/her life in someone's hands, trust used instrumentally as a tool to extract secrets, as an element of an elaborate game of pretences. This form of trust is mixed with distrust as it demonstrates malice on both sides of the encounter. Finally, an agent's trust is blind if used as a last resort when an agent faces a real danger that can endanger his/her survival. Here, an agent's trust is a mechanism for overcoming life-threatening situations but goes against rational reasons. So this is not an 'either/or' relationship (Saunders, Dietz and Thornhill 2014), it is definitely a mix of the two—trust and distrust. Our analysis indicated that a large proportion of spy interactions involved trust and distrust in the same relationship at the same time, providing support to Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998) model, which is based on the simultaneous presence of trust and distrust. Our analysis emphasized the complexity of relationships among spies, which involve various cognitive and affective factors. The multifaceted and complex nature of these relationships, as theorized by Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998), is considered a crucial condition for the possibility of co-existence of trust and distrust and our findings provide empirical insights to support this argument.
Spies enjoy spending time together, aware of their companion's duplicity and knowing that their own duplicity is taken for granted. And what is interesting, the duplicity and distrust do not detract from enjoyment of interaction. A question could be asked—can a prosecutor and a defense lawyer distrust each other in their roles in the theater of the court room, and afterward enjoy a chat as colleagues over a drink in a pub? Spies open up with each other, trust each other with their life stories while being driven by ideologically opposed objectives. The game of pretences forms a basis for trust whereby both parties trust each other to keep the pretences. Trust is built on distrust through the game of appearances, and an interaction involving bluff and double-bluff can be pleasant, nonetheless.

The quote ‘spies trade in trust’ (Macintyre 2019: 251) reminds us that acceptance of some vulnerability is almost always necessary for successful action. Vulnerability and uncertainty in social interaction is not irreducible to zero (Möllering 2006); however, in espionage where actors are aware of possible vulnerability, actors do not place their trust lightly. Trustors place their trust based on calculation (i.e. by comparing costs and benefits of trust betrayal), they limit trust to things that are crucial for the running of espionage activities (i.e. trust on need-to-know basis), and actively verify whether trust is warranted (i.e. trust but verify principle). So in the spy relationships we analyzed, trust is conditional and colored by the possibility of deception and manipulation.

Our analysis also contributes to the body of literature on the catastrophic effects of paranoid distrust for both distrustful professionals and their organizations including self-harm and chronic doubt. This perspective aligns with Slavoj Žižek’s observation that Angleton’s response to betrayal inflicted more harm on the CIA than the KGB ever did (Žižek 2006). In a different national context, Stella Rimington demonstrated the downsides of the need-to-know principle—how a lack of trust in sharing information emasculated operations. Similarly, the absolute distrust created the wilderness of mirrors, as was the case with James Angleton, leading to extreme suspicion and madness. A degree of trust is needed for organizations to function. Absolute distrust disables action and is detrimental to the agent and the secret service organization, as Angleton’s case cited above demonstrated. The case of double agent is relevant again. In the recruitment of the double agent, as much as the actual employer acts with distrust, the recruit himself or herself shows high level of trust, putting their life in the hands of the enemy. This is a tragic case of asymmetrical unidirectional trust—to offer his/her services as a double spy shows unbounded trust, but this trust is not reciprocated, often met with a high degree of distrust on the part of the employing organization.

In the spy profession oscillating between trust and distrust appears to be a modus operandi, the essence of spy craft, and the balance between the two is negotiated based on intuition and training. Only spies themselves can manage the delicate balance between trust and distrust. In line with one stream in the paradox literature, we argue that trust and distrust in the spy relationships are complementary and that they inform one another (Orlikowski and Scott 2015). Trust and distrust co-exist because they have different uses. Trust occurs as a fallback option, a solution of last resort, and as an instrument of manipulation. Distrust is used as a means of avoiding vulnerability in cases of perceived uncertainty.

Alan Fox (1966), referred to earlier in the article, highlighted the validity of the pluralist perspective on organizations. Within this perspective, distrust in organizations is unavoidable due to the existence of related but separate interests. Conflict is seen as normal and healthy, hence a delicate balance between trust and distrust may be prudent. We hope that our analysis of the world of spies raises some questions about trust and distrust that can be investigated in other professions. We suggest that other professional relationships, which are multifaceted and complex in nature, might entail both trust and distrust. In line with one stream in the paradox literature, we argue that this in itself is not necessarily negative, considering the severe consequences associated with blind trust and paranoid distrust. While much of prior work on trust and distrust in professions focused on relationships between professionals and others (e.g. clients, stakeholders), our work zooms in on trust and distrust relationships between members of the same profession and opens up avenues for future inquiry.

FUNDING
This research was supported by the British Academy Small Grants (SRG19/190602).

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