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Laura E. Wallace, Research Statement

My research program examines how people and organizations can foster trust, with consequences for their ability to address societal disadvantage, change minds, and motivate growth. I am a multi-disciplinary scholar; originally trained as an expert in attitudes and persuasion, my work integrates perspectives from the organizational trust, intergroup relations, morality, and motivation literatures while utilizing a variety of research methods, in both the laboratory and the field. My goal is to produce theory and empirical work worthy of publication in top Organizational Behavior and Psychology journals and to help individuals, scholars, and practitioners understand how to effectively create change in their personal lives, organizations, and society by fostering trust. To date, my work has centered on three major questions:

1) How do knowledge and discussions of history perpetuate or disrupt institutional distrust and disadvantage?
2) How do perceptions of others' biases influence trust and persuasion?
3) How can people and organizations foster growth?

1 History and Trust: Understanding Institutional Distrust and Cycles of Disadvantage

An unfortunate reality is that individuals and groups sometimes suffer harm from others. My work reveals two ways historical harm can breed distrust and create cycles of disadvantage beyond the initial act of harm.

Fear of distrust causes leaders to avoid individuals and groups who were previously harmed

When people and groups are harmed, how do leaders respond? Ideally, leaders would engage with victims to repair damage and restore trust. Although this response can occur, my job market paper identifies circumstances in which leaders and individuals avoid victims, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and distrust **(Wallace, Kim, Bruno & Levine, R&R)**. I theorize that people expect victims to be less trusting than non-victims, as prior research shows that experiencing even one untrustworthy act leads people to generally perceive others as less trustworthy (Roberts et al., under review). Because trust is crucial for effective collaboration, expecting victims to be distrustful can reduce willingness to collaborate with them. Unfortunately, these dynamics can result in double disadvantage whereby those initially mistreated by one are then neglected by others. This neglect can then increase victims' distrust of others, perpetuating the cycle. In six studies, I demonstrate these effects across populations and situations. I find that public health leaders feel less trusted by communities that were previously harmed by the medical community. Local government officials are less willing to seek signatures from groups harmed by their predecessors because of anticipated distrust. Working professionals are less willing to negotiate with someone who was taken advantage of in a prior negotiation. Finally, leaders in an economic game mirroring masking and vaccination decisions in the COVID-19 pandemic and other public health emergencies are less willing to collaborate with groups that have been harmed by previous leaders because of similar concerns about distrust. Thus, this work identifies a micro-level process that underlies macro-level problems – societal disadvantage and institutional distrust. This work also establishes a novel mechanism for negative reactions to victims and cycles of disadvantage: the perception that victims are distrustful creates reluctance to work with them. This mechanism does not require that leaders care about maintaining the current power structure or blame others for their misfortune, as other perspectives would suggest. The present work additionally expands trust research by examining reactions to distrust inherited from others' transgressions for the first time.

In future work, I plan to examine how to disrupt these cycles of disadvantage and distrust, for example, by examining whether giving leaders tools and time to build trust can ameliorate concerns about distrust.

Celebrating organizational history can erode trust from marginalized groups

Whereas the above work highlights that knowledge of others' history can perpetuate disadvantage, in a second line of work, I explore how celebrations of one's own organizational history can also create disparate outcomes. To persuade others to join and respect them, many organizations trumpet their historical accomplishments. For example, the Well Fargo website has stated, "The history of Wells Fargo is about more than our past…Our history has roots that continue today and set the foundation for tomorrow." In these history celebrations, companies often

fail to acknowledge the nuanced and often exclusionary contexts in which their accomplishments occurred. My research documents that this ignores concerns of historically marginalized group members, who are often aware that their group was largely excluded from the historical achievements of many institutions. Thus, when organizations celebrate their history – even with no mention of historical underrepresentation or marginalization – historically marginalized group members worry that they will be negatively stereotyped, undermining belonging, trust, and interest in joining the organization **(Wallace, Reeves, & Spencer, 2024, *PNAS*)**. In ongoing work, I examine whether majority group members understand the negative consequences that celebrating history can have for people from historically excluded groups, finding that liberals from majority groups also perceive organizations that celebrate their histories as prejudiced **(Wallace*, Reeves*, & Spencer, in prep)**.

In the future, I plan to examine how organizations can remedy these negative consequences of celebrating their history, perhaps by apologizing and making amends for historical marginalization.

2 Perceived Bias: A Novel Predictor of Reduced Trust

Literatures across domains often link trust to perceptions of morality and competence. Organizational trust research highlights the roles of benevolence, integrity, and competence for interpersonal trust. Persuasion research focuses on honesty and expertise, while social cognition emphasizes warmth and competence. However, all these models overlook *perceived bias—skewed perception*—as an additional factor that can reduce trust. Historically, researchers may have overlooked perceived bias because they conflated bias with dishonesty; researchers often study dishonesty stemming from self-interest and self-interest can both lead people to lie and to have biased perceptions. For example, autopsies of the Enron scandal often identify pursuit of financial success as fueling both unethical behavior and biased beliefs. However, my work has demonstrated that people distinguish between bias (skewed perceptions) and dishonesty (unethical behavior; **Wallace, Wegener, & Petty, 2020, *JPSP***). Consider the downfall of Blockbuster, which is often attributed to executives being in denial that their brick-and-mortar business model no longer worked. This was an issue of bias, not dishonesty, and yet certainly the perception that they were biased undermined stakeholder trust.

Punishing Perceived Bias versus Dishonesty

Unfortunately, people sometimes violate others' trust by sharing false information. Negotiation partners might lie about what they can offer, and leaders might paint an overly rosy picture of company health. Although much research explores how dishonesty is punished, falsehoods can also arise from people's biased beliefs. For example, while many view Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes's false claims as lying, others perceive she genuinely believed her claims; her beliefs were just biased. In ongoing work (**Wallace & Levine, R&R**), I examine whether people are less likely to punish bias-based versus dishonesty-based misinformation, holding constant the falsehood. Across five pre-registered experiments, I find that people punish the same falsehood less when they perceive it as stemming from bias rather than dishonesty. This effect is not just driven by perceived intentionality; dishonesty is also seen as a stronger indicator of a willingness to engage in immoral behavior. Across studies, I demonstrate that people punish bias less than dishonesty when they have been misled in an incentive compatible negotiation and that even lawyers – professional experts in punishment – award more jailtime for dishonesty rather than bias.

Clarifying the Role of Perceived Bias in Persuasion (Trust in Words)

Beyond managing perceptions after a falsehood, people also aim to persuade others—a crucial skill for effective leadership and team management. Prior work had only considered perceived honesty and expertise as perceptions that would affect persuasion. Yet, my work has demonstrated that perceiving a communicator as biased independently undermines trust and persuasion, in contexts ranging from political campaigns to public health policies (**Wallace, Wegener, & Petty, 2020, *PSPB;* Wallace & Wegener, 2023, *Compass***). For example, when advocating for a how a team might allocate limited resources in a crisis, people are more persuasive when they are perceived as less biased. These consequences can be far-reaching, as perceived bias on one topic can carry over to future, even unrelated topics (**Wallace, Wegener, Quinn, & Ross, 2021, *PSPB***).

However, perceived bias does not always undermine persuasion. People expect biased communicators to be consistent in their positions so when biased communicators switch positions, people infer that they must have had good reasons for doing so (**Wallace, Wegener, & Petty, 2020, *JPSP***). For example, if a conservative news

outlet switches to endorse a normatively progressive policy, it suggests that the media organization must have had especially strong reasons to support the policy, boosting persuasion. Comparatively, people do not have these same consistency expectations for dishonest communicators, who are unconcerned about aligning their messages with their true positions.

Balancing Perceived Bias and Expertise: Challenges in Building Trust for Underrepresented Groups

Although any communicator can be perceived as biased when advocating for their own or group's interest, this challenge is particularly important to consider for underrepresented group members who are often labeled as biased when advocating for their communities. This finding has led some to argue that underrepresented advocates are at a persuasive disadvantage and that instead majority group members should take on the social justice advocacy (Crandall et al., 2021; Drury & Kaiser, 2014; Monteith et al., 2019; Schultz & Maddox, 2013).

However, my work identifies a previously overlooked advantage afforded to advocates from underrepresented groups: they are also perceived as *experts* on issues related to their underrepresentation **(Wallace, Craig, & Wegener, 2024, *JESP*)**. My research finds that perceived bias and expertise have opposing independent effects on persuasion: underrepresented versus majority group members are more persuasive because of their perceived expertise, but less persuasive because of their perceived bias. This results in no difference in the effectiveness of underrepresented versus majority group advocates, challenging the notion that advocates from underrepresented groups are less effective in advocating for change. That is, in contrast to current conclusions, my work suggests that although women (versus men) are more likely to be viewed as biased, they are *also viewed as more expert* when advocating for gender equity, making them just as persuasive as male advocates.

Strategies for Managing Perceived Bias

The findings above highlight that it is important to understand how communicators can try to avoid being seen as biased. For example, underrepresented groups members may be more persuasive if they can reduce perceptions of bias. My work has identified a number of such strategies. When communicators provide two-sided rather than one-sided messages, they are viewed as less biased (**Wallace, Hinsenkamp, Wegener, & Braun, 2024, *PSPB***). For instance, political campaigners appear less biased when they acknowledge both positives and negatives of the candidate they endorse. However, this effect depends on whether the topic is seen as two-sided. When communicators present two-sided messages on topics that recipients view as one-sided, like incest or equality, it actually amplifies the perception of bias. Furthermore, communicators are less likely to be deemed biased when they justify their position with strong arguments (**Wallace, Wegener, Quinn, & Ross, 2021, *PSPB***) or when they acknowledge uncertainty in their position (**Wallace, Luttrell, & Wegener, in prep**).

In sum, perceived bias is a unique and consequential antecedent to trust. In the future, I plan to examine, not just how people can avoid being perceived as biased, but how they may recover from biased-based trust violations.

3 MOTIVATING OTHER'S GROWTH

Motivating individual and organizational change is vital for leaders to foster growth and innovation. My work examines the psychological processes underlying two ways that leaders might motivate change and nurture trust.

Engaging in Difficult Conversations

Often, to help others grow, people need to engage in difficult conversations. Managers may need to give employees feedback; executives may need to share plans for a reorganization. These conversations not only help others grow, they can foster trust. Prior work suggests that people are hesitant to engage in these conversations, primarily because they inaccurately assume that the costs outweigh the benefits. Across a theory paper **(Levine, Wallace, Kim, & Perry, invited revision)** and an empirical paper **(Kim, Levine, Wallace, & Bitterly, R&R)**, my work has elucidated an additional challenge for engaging in difficult conversations: people experience them as want-should dilemmas. That is, similar to other want-should dilemmas, such as choosing healthy food over junk food, the costs associated with difficult conversations are more visceral and short term (discomfort, hurt feelings) than the benefits (learning and growth). In our empirical paper, we provide three critical tests of a want-should perspective on difficult conversations. First, across diverse samples (laypeople from the U.S., politicians, physicians, university

students from Hong Kong), we find that people perceive the costs of difficult conversations to occur before the benefits. Second, in a within-subjects experiment, we find that people are more willing to have difficult conversations in the future than the present. Finally, in a field experiment, we demonstrate that parents are willing to take on costly pre-commitment devices to motivate themselves to have a difficult conversation. In our theory paper, we highlight how psychological distance and abstraction can be tools for getting people to engage in these important, but difficult conversations. The empirical paper was the 2024 winner of the IACM Outstanding Conference Paper Award.

Understanding "When" rather than "Whether" Growth Mindsets Have Salubrious Effects

Beyond engaging in difficult conversations, much research suggests that if leaders want to help their charges grow and improve, leaders should instill subordinates with the belief that intelligence and other abilities are immutable versus mutable (fixed versus growth mindset). Given prior work demonstrating powerful effects of growth mindsets for enhancing resilience in the face of setbacks and promoting self-improvement motivation, many researchers have developed interventions to try to instill growth mindsets. The efficacy and replicability of these interventions and mindset effects in general, however, has been controversial (e.g. Foliano, et al., 2019; Sisk et al., 2018). My work shifts the conversation about growth mindsets from "whether" they have effects to "when" with two approaches. First, my work has highlighted a "matching" effect, where personal growth mindsets primarily boost belonging and trust in organizations that also endorse growth mindsets (**Wallace, LaCosse, Murphy, Hernandez-Colmenares, Edwards, & Fujita, 2023, *JEP:G***). Second, my colleagues and I have suggested that people not only vary in whether they view their skills and abilities as malleable, but also in the *certainty* with which they hold those beliefs (**Wallace, Murphy, Hernandez-Colmenares, & Fujita, 2025, *JPSP***). My research has demonstrated that mindsets guide people's engagement and trust in organizations to the extent that they are held with high rather than low certainty. Similarly, the benefits of growth mindsets on task performance and persistence on challenging tasks appear only when they are held with certainty (**Wallace, Hernandez-Colmenares, & Fujita, in progress**). Thus, mindset certainty appears to play a key role in determining when mindsets produce positive outcomes. My work also finds that people who are more certain in their fixed mindsets are more resistant to persuasive messages advocating for growth mindsets (**Hernandez-Colmenares, Wallace, & Fujita, under review**), highlighting a challenge for interventions. In the future, I plan to develop programs that target mindset certainty as a critical component of intervention materials with intervention scientists.

Conclusion

In sum, by investigating the causes and consequences of trust, my work elucidates how people can address societal disadvantage, persuade others, and motivate growth. In the future, I look forward to developing basic theory and providing practical insights to practitioners with the goal of informing policy and interventions to promote principled dissent, foster inclusion in a diverse workforce, motivate employees to do their best work, and create ethical organizations.