Title: Trust and Distrust in Work Relationships: A Grounded Approach

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Abstract

Most research on trust and distrust has proceeded from theorizing about the nature of trust, and deducing the key definitions of the phenomena, key components of the definitions, and important contributors to trust-building or distrust-building processes. While these approaches are conceptually appealing and appear to have face validity, little research on trust and distrust has evolved by beginning with layperson descriptions of actual trust and distrust events.

The purpose of this study was to examine detailed descriptions of trust and distrust events and determine the most appropriate categories to distinguish within and between these events. Stories of trust and distrust were solicited, and a grounded theory approach was used to develop codes of these stories. Codes distinguished trust and distrust stories within and across the following dimensions: types of trust, how knowledge about the other is derived (the role of reputation), relationship between trustor and trustee, the role of time in trust-inducing and distrust-creating events, and the role of volition. Implications of these findings for trust theorizing, trust measurement and trust development are discussed.

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Trust
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Relationships

EMPIRICAL PAPER

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Researchers have yet to agree on a widely-shared definition of trust or distrust (Belanger, Hiller, & Smith, 2002; Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998). Perhaps the most commonly accepted approach defines trust as one person's expectations about another or, more specifically, "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor" (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). From this starting point, scholars have begun to investigate various types of trust and the components of trust. Mayer and colleagues (Mayer et al., 1995) contend that three core components of trust –ability, benevolence and integrity– should be the focus of trust research. Lewicki and colleagues have argued for two distinctions: calculus-based trust, or a market-based calculation determined by outcomes resulting from maintaining the relationship relative to those of severing it, and identification-based trust, where the parties understand and share fundamental values and can act as agents for one another (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2001). McAllister (1995) contends that affect-based trust is a separate form, encompassing liking and feelings of affection for another person.

Even fewer scholars have investigated the form and components of distrust. Traditionally, distrust has been viewed as simply the opposite of trust, or the expectation that another person will not act in one's best interests or may perhaps even threaten injury (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998). Others contend that distrust is the absence of trust, or the belief that individuals will not behave in a capable or responsible way (Barber, 1983; Lewicki, Tomlinson & Wang, 2005). More recently, distrust and trust are viewed as separate, distinct, and co-existing constructs within multi-faceted relationships (Lewicki et al., 1998; Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2001).

Not only are there divergent views of the structures of trust and distrust, but all of these definitions have been derived from theoretical speculation. That is, trust and distrust research has relied upon measures and calibrations which are derived deductively from theoretical propositions about the nature and structure of trust and distrust; little work has been done inductively, in which actual trust and distrust experiences have been used to explore how parties in relationships characterize these events. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we will explore how individuals describe trust and distrust experiences, to determine whether the components of those descriptions reflect the significant theorizing about the structure of the trust and distrust constructs in the research literature. Second, we will compare those descriptions to determine if trust and distrust are indeed mirror image constructs, or possess different types and forms. Because no existing research sheds light on this subject, we propose two research questions, rather than hypotheses:

Research Question 1:How do individuals describe their own experiences of trust and distrust?

Research Question 2: Do individuals describe trust and distrust in similar, mirror-image terms or in different terms?

In addition to these two broad research questions, we propose to explore several additional questions about trust.

Trust development. In the development of the trust literature, there have been a number of implicit theories about trust development over time (see Lewicki, Tomlinson and Wang, 2005 for one review). Probably the most ubiquitous approach has been to assume that trust and distrust were opposite ends of a single dimension, and that trust development was a relatively monotonic, step-wise, linear process. For example, Lewis and Weigart (1985) contend that trust evolves

from a pattern of careful, rational thinking, coupled with an examination of one's feelings, instincts, and intuition. Trust develops from a process of thinking and feeling on the part of the trustor (Morrow, Hansen & Pearson, 2004). Similarly, Brockner and colleagues (Brockner, Siegel, Daly, Tyler, & Martin, 1997) contend that trust is measured by asking trustors to assess their general relationship with individual trustees. This is consistent with Lewicki and Wiethoff's (2001) contention that identity-based trust develops as parties gain knowledge of one another, usually by sharing information with one another through a series of interactions that leads the parties to discover commonalities in identities, values and reactions to people and situations (Kwon & Suh, 2004; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). This general prescription suggests that trust develops relatively slowly and systematically over time (although exceptions are noted—c.f. Myerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996).

On the other hand, research work on trust repair suggests that a trust violation can trigger precipitous declines in trust over a short period of time (e.g. Tomlinson, Dineen & Lewicki, 2004). Several authors (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2001) have suggested that trust functions much like the child's game, "Chutes and Ladders", trust building is like ladder-climbing, slow and systematic; trust violations which produce distrust can be sudden, precipitous and resistant to efforts at trust rebuilding or repair. Distrust is incubated when people form negative assumptions about one another and treat these assumptions as fact (Hultman, 2004). This, while trust building is generally construed as being slow and systematic, distrust-building may be quick, episodic but yet enduring once created.

Hypothesis 1: Distrust is episodic, whereas trust develops over time.

The role of the trustee's reputation. The reputation of the other should have a significant impact on the decision to trust. In studies on the role of reputation in negotiation,

researchers have found that a reputation for distributive negotiation leads the other to trust their counterparts very little, exchange very little information, and have poorer outcomes (Tinsley, Sullivan and O'Connor, (2002). In contrast, a reputation for integrative negotiation leads the other to expect less deception, engage in more candid discussion of interests, and be more optimistic about reaching a win-win agreement—but not necessarily more trust (O'Connor and Tinsley, 2004). Burt and Knez (1995) found that gossip from third parties amplifies trust when pre-existing relationships are strong, but has a negative effect on trust when relationships are weak. Their study suggests that negative information about a person may be likely to lead to distrust, but that third party information will be less salient when trust has already been formed. These authors further contend that third party gossip reinforces existing relationships, such that a person's existing trust (or distrust) for another person is made stronger by confirming third party gossip (Burt & Knez, 1996). Hultman (2004) agrees, arguing that distrust is spread when people share their negative views with one another. These results about the impact of trust and distrust reputation information leads us to propose that:

Hypothesis 2: Reputation contributes more to distrust than to trust.

Trust and attributions. Finally, attributions of trustworthiness are typically thought to be "earned" by the trustee (Perry & Mankin, 2004). For example, specific behaviors such as truthfulness (Dasgupta, 1988), reliability (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982), and openness (Gabarro, 1978) are known to contribute to one's trustworthiness. In addition, research in the role of various forms of accounts (e.g. explanations, apologies, etc.) has shown that the effectiveness of these accounts is highly dependent on how the 'victim' of the trust violation makes attributions about the controllability and causality of the violation (Weiner, Figueroa-Munoz & Kakihara, 1991; Weiner, B., Folkes, V. S., Amirkhan, J., & Verette, J. A. 1987). That

is, some actors who attempt to deny responsibility for past transgressions account for the trust-violation actions as externally caused and uncontrollable, while those who employ promises and apologies frame the transgression as internal and controllable (and take responsibility for the violation by virtue of the promise and apology) (Tomlinson, 2004). The key role played by attribution dynamics in explaining perceptions of trust violations, and accounts to repair that trust, raise interesting questions about whether similar attributions are in play in accounting for trust-development activities. That is, do trust-building behaviors need to be perceived as volitional (internally caused and controllable) in order for trustworthiness to be assumed? Similarly, do the perceptions of untrustworthy behavior also require assumptions of personal volition? Given the paucity of research on this topic, we choose to pose this as a research question rather than a hypothesis.

Research Question 3: Do 'receivers' in trusting and distrusting relationships perceive the trustor's actions as volitional?

Method

Participants

Participants were 287 students enrolled in MBA programs in three universities, two in the Midwest and one on the East Coast. Most were enrolled in a class on negotiation skills. All students received either course credit or extra credit for writing essays in which they recounted episodes from their previous work experience that involved trust and/or distrust. Some of the students (n = 164) wrote about a time when they did not trust someone in a work relationship, and others (n = 119) wrote about a time when they did trust someone in a work relationship. Four of the essays were eliminated from the study because students did not follow parameters for the assignment. No demographic data was collected from the students.

Measures

We used a grounded theory approach to develop a coding scheme. The two authors and two additional colleagues well versed in the trust literature each read a series of essays and agreed on a coding schematic. Then, the first author trained four student coders. Each essay was reviewed by the first author and at least 2 student coders to establish inter-coder reliabilities. Inter-coder reliability rates for each variable, and frequency data, are shown in Tables 1 (trust) and 2 (distrust).

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Insert Tables 1 and 2 Here

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Coding Trust Scenarios. Five major categories were derived to assess the trust scenarios: Type of Trust, Knowledge about the Other's Trustworthiness, Relationship With Other, Time, and Volition.

Type of trust. To identify types of trust, coders were instructed to look for parts of the essay that told then what the trust described in the scenario was based on. Multiple codes were possible in this section, but coders were asked to make a designation of the primary type of trust being described. Then they were to categorize types of trust as follows: Calculus-Based (the system/environment protected me from acts of distrust, or the rewards for the person to be trustworthy were sufficient to induce their behavior); Identity-Based (we had similar values, we stand for the same things); Affective-Based (I liked this person, and knew he/she liked me too); Ability-Based (I think this person could do the job appropriately); Diversity-Based (trust based on common gender, culture, ethnic heritage); and Other (forms/kinds of trust that don't fit these three categories).

Knowledge of the Other's Trustworthiness (Reputation). To identify how knowledge about the other person's trustworthiness was obtained, coders were instructed to look for key events in the scenario that gave the trustor information about the trustee. The following categories emerged: Reputation (other people served as "witnesses" or shared his/her reputation for trustworthiness); Past Related Experiences (similar in situation and form to the central situation in the essay); Past Unrelated Experiences (past interactions not similar to the current situation); Role (person's role indicated that I should trust them); and Other (other ways of obtaining knowledge that don't fit these categories).

Relationship with Other. We also sought to ascertain the nature of the relationship between the parties in the scenario. These were coded as either Peer, Supervisor/Subordinate, or Other relationships.

Time. On the Time variable, coders were asked to indicate if the trust was formed as a result of Episodic (one thing/event was enough to prompt trust) or Time (events over time prompted trust). An Other category was available for this variable as well.

Volition. Finally, coders were asked to evaluate Volition with the following instructions, "Is the situation causing the trust seen by the person writing the essay as the "responsibility" or "because of" the person being trusted? In other words, should the other person be recognized or held responsible for the situation? Coders answered Yes, No, or Other/unclear.

Coding Distrust Scenarios. Coding instructions for the Type of Trust, Knowledge, Relationship With Other, Time, and Volition categories were the same as noted above, with the word "distrust" being substituted for "trust." When coding types of distrust, coders used the following descriptions: Calculus-Based (the system was not set up so that I was protected, or the costs for the person to be trustworthy were NOT sufficient to deter them); Identity-Based (we

had differing values, did not stand for the same things); Affective-Based (I didn't like this person, and knew he/she didn't like me); Ability-Based (I didn't think this person could do the job appropriately); Diversity-Based (Distrust based on differing gender, culture, ethnic heritage), and Other (forms/kinds of distrust that do not fit these categories). Categories for Knowledge, Relationship, Time and Volition were the same as the Trust codes.

Results

To investigate Research Question 1, frequency data from the coding categories was compared. As can be seen from the Tables, overall frequency patterns of codes used to describe trust events were comparatively quite different than frequency patterns of codes used to describe distrust events. We thus moved on to Research Question 2. We first examined the types of trust and distrust. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, ability-based attributions were significant precursors of both trust (61%) and distrust (33%), but used more frequently to describe trust. The greatest difference between trust and distrust was seen in the area of Calculus-Based attributions. These accounted for 5% of the trust scenarios, but 41% of the distrust scenarios.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that distrust would develop in a single episode, whereas trusting relationships would develop over time. To test this hypothesis, we examined the percentage of responses in each time category for both trusting and distrusting relationships. We found that 85% of trusting relationships developed over time, whereas 8% were coded as episodic. On the distrust side, results were more mixed. A majority (51%) reported that distrust occurred as a result of a single episode, while 41% responded that distrust had developed over time. Still, the dramatic difference between the reports of distrust developing as a result of a single episode between the trust and distrust essays lends support to the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that Knowledge about the Other, particularly reputation, would contribute more to trust than to distrust. Again, we examined the percentage of responses in each Knowledge category for both trusting and distrusting relationships. As predicted, reputation was a factor in distrust development in 30% of those cases – the second-highest antecedent reported. However, none of the respondents discussing the development of trusting relationships listed reputation as an important precipitating factor. Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Finally, Research Question 3 examined perceptions of volitional behavior in trusting and distrusting situations. Results revealed differences between trust and distrust on this variable. Specifically, in trusting situations, participants indicated that trustees were responsible for the situation in only 13% of the reported cases. However, in distrusting situations, participants indicated that the other party was responsible for the situation in 68% of the situations. There appear to be major differences in perceptions of the other party's responsibility when the situation involves trust or distrust.

Discussion

This study can advance theory and practice in a variety of ways. While many scholars theorize about trust, and use pre-existing scales to measure it in organizations, neither of these practices gives us information about how organizational members really experience trust. The value and power of soliciting their own, unprompted stories, and then organizing their experiences in a meaningful way, is demonstrated by this data. While many of these descriptions emphasize aspects of trust that have been reflected in previous definitions and measures of trust and trust development, other elements have received less attention. Thus, some existing conceptual categories can adequately be used to explain lived experiences of trust and distrust (hence current theory and practice are not distant), but these approaches may be incomplete.

It is noteworthy that ability-based attributions were a significant predictor of both trust and distrust in workplace relationships. Ability was mentioned as a reason to trust and to distrust significantly more often than were shared or disparate values (identity-based trust/distrust) and liking or disliking (affective-based trust/distrust). Moreover, ability was much more important than diversity or similarity in culture and background. This bodes well for a U.S. workforce that faces ever-increasingly diverse workforces in the years ahead. It appears that competent workers will earn the trust of their peers and managers, regardless of personal differences between them. The importance of ability as a significant contributor to trust reinforces its importance as a component of the Mayer et. al. (1995) conceptualization of trust.

The strength of relationship between the dominance of calculus-based attributions and distrust is remarkable. This suggests that people may only investigate protective systems, or think about the costs of others' behavior, when they feel threatened or unsure. On the other hand, if all appears to be going well, calculating the costs of another's behavior simply isn't salient. This finding lends support to those who have theorized that many people begin relationships with a presumption that the other is trustworthy, and that a moderate to high level of initial trust is warranted (Jones & George, 1998; Kramer, 1994). Our data shows that not only may there be a presumption of trust, but a concomitant lack of attention to possible trust violations. Future research will need to tease out these presumptions, but the importance of further understanding attributional processes in trust-building and distrust-building interactions is reinforced by our research.

The finding that trust develops over time, while distrust is episodic, has interesting implications. Lewicki and colleagues (Lewicki et al., 1998) contend that most relationships have elements of both trust and distrust. However, our data suggest that relationships in which initial

encounters produce distrust may be less likely to develop unless ongoing interdependence is required. In addition to lending credence to conventional wisdom on the importance of first impressions, these findings indicate that relationships without a prior foundation of trust are not likely to survive perceptions of distrust. One practical implication of these results is that companies should provide trust-building opportunities for work colleagues as they begin their interaction, so that a foundation is built that allows the relationship to survive should distrusting episodes occur.

Similarly, the role of reputation in creating distrust is noteworthy. Our findings suggest that people develop trust based on their own observations, but are quicker to develop distrust based on the claimed experiences of others. Marketing lore says that a dissatisfied customer will tell more people about their bad experiences with a business than will a satisfied customer, and perhaps this is true in relationships among organizational colleagues as well. Evidently, people with a good reputation may need to continually prove themselves to new colleagues, whereas those with poor reputations may not even get the chance to do so or may have a significantly harder job building trust.

Finally, our research suggests that people blame others for distrust, but do not similarly give others credit for trust. Additional perusal of the data gave us some insight into this finding. It appears that, when people develop a trusting relationship, they either (a) congratulate themselves on being able to "spot someone worth their trust" (Participant T-82), or (b) believe that their own trustworthiness caused the relationship to develop positively. On the other hand, people who experience a situation where distrust is paramount tend to either (a) attribute injurious motives to the other person, as in "she was just out to get me" (Participant D-106), or

(b) blame themselves for being gullible, or less than properly diligent. In our study, as noted in Table 2, the first reaction was much more common than the second in accounts of distrust.

Limitations

Participants were asked to recall experiences from their past, in the context of a classroom. This limits the generalizability of our findings in three ways. First, it is likely that memories of past experiences will be inaccurate, or colored by subsequent events or interpretations. Parties may have reported idealized or exaggerated stories that are not necessarily representative of their actual real-time experiences. Second, students were asked to reflect on these experiences while enrolled in negotiation classes that emphasized discussions of trust and distrust. This, too, may have skewed their presentation of events. Finally, since the students' papers were turned into professors for credit (papers were not graded but students were given credit for completing the assignment), there may have been some social response bias in this study.

Future Research

Replication and validation of these data will be an important next step. The coding scheme we developed can guide future researchers to obtain stories and experiences from a variety of populations. Continuing to explore the differences and similarities between trust and distrust descriptions is important to both theory and practice. The findings from these stories can help to sharpen the validity of various theories and models that propose definitions of trust and distrust, and the dynamics of trust-building, distrust-building, trust-rebuilding and distrust-reducing processes.

Future studies should also consider differences in outcomes of trust and distrust. Similarly, it is important to consider situational contextual factors – such as rules, norms, and

time pressures – that contribute to the development of trust and distrust. It would also be useful to study the ways that reputations are communicated, and the activities through which people can convey that they can be trusted, or that a negative reputation should be ignored. Finally, future research should investigate how interaction dynamics change as trust and distrust are developed.

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Table 1

Trust Coding Schematic, Inter-Coder Reliabilities, and Frequencies

Trust Code	Inter-Coder Reliability*	Frequency
Types of Trust		
Calculus-Based	87	5 (5%)
Identity-Based	91	25 (21%)
Affective-Based	92	16 (13%)
Ability-Based	89	73 (61%)
Diversity-Based		0
Other		0
How Knowledge Was Obtained		
Reputation		0
Past Related Experiences	91	106 (89%)
Past Unrelated Experiences		0
Role	90	4 (3%)
Direct Observation in Current Task	90	5 (4%)
Other	81	4 (3%)
Relationship		
Peers	94	29 (24%)
Supervisor/Subordinate	95	64 (54%)
Other	92	26 (22%)
Time		
Episodic	93	10 (8%)
Over Time	91	101 (85%)
Other	87	8 (7%)
Volition		
Yes	86	16 (13%)
No	82	64 (54%)
Other/Unsure	90	39 (33%)

*Inter-Coder Reliability indicates the percentage of time the coders agreed on codes in this section.

Table 2

Distrust Coding Schematic, Inter-Coder Reliabilities, and Frequencies

Distrust Code	Inter-Coder Reliability*	Frequency
Types of Distrust		
Calculus-Based	90	67 (41%)
Identity-Based	91	27 (16%)
Affective-Based	92	8 (5%)
Ability-Based	91	54 (33%)
Diversity-Based	100	1 (<1%)
Other	99	7 (4%)
How Knowledge Was Obtained		
Reputation	91	50 (30%)
Past Related Experiences	91	61 (37%)
Past Unrelated Experiences	90	8 (5%)
Role	89	10 (6%)
Direct Observation in Current Task	92	35 (21%)
Other		0
Relationship		
Peers	91	54 (33%)
Supervisor/Subordinate	94	93 (57%)
Other	94	17 (10%)
Time		
Episodic	93	84 (51%)
Over Time	93	67 (41%)
Other	98	13 (8%)
Volition		
Yes	93	111 (68%)
No	93	31 (19%)
Other/Unsure	91	22 (13%)

*Inter-Coder Reliability indicates the percentage of time the coders agreed on codes in this section.