Further Exploration of Organizational Trust Factors

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Trust facilitates individual and organizational learning, and is often misunderstood by organizations although they must continuously learn in order to attain strategic goals and survive. Furthermore, leaders of organizations often view trust defensively and their reactions may impede organizational learning. This paper builds on prior research concerning antecedents of organizational trust, explores key behaviors that influence trust in organizations and linkages between trust and distrust, and discusses results based on statistical research.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Organizational Trust, Measurement

This paper provides a brief overview of the literature relating to organizational and individual trust and explores the relationships among three constructs: adult attachment, organizational trust, and distrust. The paper opens with a brief problem statement regarding our understanding of aspects of organizational trust. It then provides an overview of the literature on organizational trust and a discussion of definitions of trust. The paper then briefly explores a model looking at trust and distrust as separate variables, as well as measurement issues regarding these variables.

The paper traces the trust that individuals manifest in organizations to the roots of trusting relationships developed during childhood attachment experience. Initial attachment experience may be modified by subsequent experience. However, the struggles with trust and distrust from childhood are often durable, and carry forward into adult life. The paper continues with a discussion of trust and distrust from a conceptual perspective as well as the challenges of accurately measuring these constructs. The paper continues with a summary discussion of the three constructs of adult attachment, organizational trust, and distrust, their relationships with each other followed by a brief discussion of the influence of leader and employee defensiveness on personal and organizational learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings based on tests of instruments to measure the constructs, a brief discussion of plans for additional research, and considerations for practice.

Theoretical Framework

Individual trust has a long history of being a crucial concept for understanding interpersonal and group dynamics, and literature referenced in this paper is foundational to a discussion of the antecedents of organizational trust and current measurement issues. Trust plays a key role in organizational learning and performance (Shaw, 1997), and organizations must learn continuously (Drucker, 1999; Senge, 1990). However, trust is often ignored by organizations, even though organizations have generally declined in their perceived trustworthiness (Tyler & Kramer, 1996). Trust is usually viewed as important for successful organizational function, and distrust (whose roots may be traced to various fears) is considered deleterious for organizational harmony and performance. For example, Drucker (1999) assumes that trust is present and is important for the exchange of knowledge within organizations and that this exchange is crucial if organizations are to successfully compete and survive (Drucker, 1999). The hoarding of knowledge is common in organizations, and tends to hinder organizational productivity. Unfortunately, leaders of organizations often respond defensively to inquiries regarding trust levels in their organizations and their responses may hinder personal as well as organizational learning.

The concept of organizational trust is elusive and subject to a wide range of definitions, as well as contributing factors and circumstances. Trust is subtle, and is sensitive to situation as well as organizational context. As with other organizational constructs, such as culture or climate, we cannot measure organizational trust directly. Instead, we rely on the perceptions of individuals within the organization, who will have different views of recalled situations and contexts based on their experience. Those views are represented as variance in the measure, while the mean measure is considered to be a descriptive statistic for the organization as a whole. Statistical analyses are often helpful as a part of the triangulation process, and may help us to weed out factors relating to organizational trust which appear plausible based on qualitative literature, but are shown to lack statistical significance.

Contrasting Definitions of Trust

There is no agreement among prominent authors on a single definition of individual or organizational trust (Kurstedt, 2002). This lack of agreement on a definition of trust means that different authors not only perceive trust in different ways (often within the context of their academic domains), but also that they discuss different constructs when they speak of trust. Disagreements over definitions are frequent in the literature, particularly regarding complex and subtle constructs, such as trust, well grounded statistical analysis can sometimes help us to clarify our understanding.

This use of multiple definitions of trust contributes to the confusion in the literature because authors use the same or similar terms to describe different constructs. One definition of trust developed by Shockley-Zalabak and associates views organizational trust and distrust are opposite ends of a single variable that are inversely related to each other. In contrast, a model of trust and distrust presented by Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies (1998) is based on the contention that trust and distrust are separate but linked dimensions. Another common conceptualization of organizational trust considers it to be an aggregate of interactional trust within an organization context and based on peer, supervisory and upper management interpersonal interactions. These three different measures have some very important conceptual distinctions.

Comparing organizations to individuals is common in organizational behavior discourse. They are both human systems (as are dyads and groups). Although as human systems, they are more complex, in part because they are composed of individuals, dyads, and groups. Even individual trust varies, depending on the object of that trust. So, if a single individual were considered, would an overall "trusting nature" be the total of the person's relationships with respect to trust? Or, would it be a general propensity to trust, somewhat independent of specific relationships?

The same notion can be applied to organizations. Is organizational trust a feature of the climate, culture, and policies of an organization? Or, is organizational trust the sum total of the members' perceptions of their coworkers and managers? This distinction has conceptual implications, as well as issues with respect to measurement.

Is the nature of trust dependent on the object of the trust and the perceptions of individuals regarding trust? An appropriate approach might be to measure across objects and consider the objects separately. Then, organizational trust would be either the total of all interactions in the workplace, or separate constructs to be explored individually based on the object of trust. Our findings, based on statistical research conducted to date, point to the realization of different aspects of trust as we examine it using different lenses. Let us begin our further exploration of trust with a review of differing definitions of trust derived, in part, from different views of the dimensionality of trust.

Shockley defines trust as follows:

> The organization's willingness, based on its culture and communication behaviors in relationships and transactions, to be appropriately vulnerable if it believes that another individual, group or organization is competent, open, and honest, concerned, reliable, and identified with common goals, norms and values. (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, & Cesaria, 2000) (p. 8)

This definition implies that organizational trust is multidimensional. It suggests characteristics of an organization that constitute trust, that trust is a set of organizational characteristics providing an atmosphere for others to act in certain ways. It also refers to vulnerability, suggesting that trust creates an atmosphere of safety in which people don't fear punishment or retribution. However, one wonders if trust is a multifaceted construct, influenced by but apart from the objects of trust? If so, those distinct characteristics of trust should be measured independently, and then considered separately.

Lewicki et al. define trust quite differently from Shockley, and link trust to distrust. They define trust as "…confident positive expectations regarding another's conduct," and they define distrust as "confident negative expectations regarding another's conduct" (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998), p. 439). These definitions suggest that trust could be considered one-dimensional, if trust is conceptualized on a continuum or negative to positive expectations. However, the notion of trust includes various levels of expectations, ranging from low to high. The level of expectations may be due to past experience as well as preconceived anticipation of what may occur in the future.

This definition implies that trust is one-dimensional, and distinct from the concept of distrust. This definition uses two different terms to describe separate but related constructs, each of which could exist along a continuum. The concept that trust and distrust could exist simultaneously is interesting, and different from other concepts in the literature.

A Model of Trust and Distrust

Lewicki et al. view trust and distrust as separate and linked constructs and provide a model (Table 1) that is useful for examining trust in individuals and organizations and for showing how trust may change over time. Their model provides a conceptual richness and depth to our understanding because it shows the interplay of trust and distrust and the ambiguity inherent in interpersonal transactions in the workplace. This richness of this perspective may aid our understanding of the contextual and situational complexities of trust in organizations. Lewicki et al. also assert that trust and distrust are two dimensions that are interconnected, that they exist along indefinite continuums, and that both are often present in interpersonal situations.

The discussion of Lewicki et al. provides important insight into individual's behavior in organizations that may reflect contextual influences as well as the ambiguity and conflicted feelings that are frequently present in workplace situations. For example, an individual's perception of whether to trust a supervisor or upper level manager may be heavily influenced by the salience and recency of experience with that person. This is particularly true because trust is fragile and most employees in the workplace have learned to be wary. Trust can also be influenced by organizational culture which tends to be developed over time and may be particularly shaped by the initial leaders of an organization (Schein, 1996). For example, repressive and punitive leaders may establish a climate of fear in their organizations.

Specifically, the Lewicki et al. model is useful for developing a better understanding of the behavioral dynamics and ambiguities of trust and distrust in an organizational situation. For example, when high trust and low distrust are present, new initiatives can be undertaken and opportunities pursued (Quadrant 1). Under conditions of high trust and low distrust, individuals tend to perceive each other as partners pursuing common objectives. They are also likely to identify with the values of their partner and have positive affect for their partner. On the other hand, when high distrust and low trust exist between individuals, harmful motives on the part of others are assumed and defensive reactions predominate (Quadrant 4).

The conceptualization presented by Lewicki et al. in this table ties to extensive work by other researchers who conclude that many individuals, including leaders, in organizations operate in a defensive manner and tend to focus on self protection and their own best interests (Argyris, 1993). Employees in organizations, who often perceive themselves as relatively powerless, are often resistant to change. Leaders in organizations may perceive employee's resistance to change as irrational. However, employees may simply be reacting to the possibilities of perceived losses that may result from the implementation of organizational changes. And leaders may be blind to their own equally defensive behaviors when changes may negatively impact on them or the trajectory of their careers. Argyris also points out that the defensive actions taken by individuals in organizations can contribute to a disparity between espoused values and the values in use in the organization and that defensiveness can also hinder organizational learning. Our understanding could be increased by a fuller exploration of the bases for such resistance. This topic, however, is outside the scope of this paper.

Although the Lewicki et al. model is helpful in understanding trust, it also has some shortcomings. First, they do not explain why some individuals have a higher level of trust when approaching a given situation. For example, some individuals may enter organizations with higher levels of anxiety due to their "fearful" adult attachment. Second, the model is somewhat simplistic because it places individual reactions into four distinct categories and thereby omits ambivalent reactions that do not fit neatly into one of the four categories, a general and simple presentation of individual responses that may sacrifice accuracy (Weick, 1979). In addition, it may be useful to consider whether individuals may move between the Quadrants of their model as their initial trust perceptions are modified by subsequent experience in an organization. For example, one might join an organization with a "wait and see" approach consistent with Quadrant 3, and then shift into Quadrant 2 "trust but verify" as a result of realizing that harm may come to those who are willing to take imprudent risks. Third, the model is biased toward high trust and low distrust as a desirable approach to a situation for an individual. While operating within this quadrant is intuitively appealing, based on our experience, organizations seldom operate to make it feasible for individuals to make themselves vulnerable at the level implied by this Quadrant. In many workplace situations, wariness is advisable (Kramer, 2002).

Table 1: *Integrating Trust and Distrust*

High Trust	Quadrant 1	Quadrant 2
	"Friend"	**"Trust but Verify"**
Characterized by Hope, Faith, Confidence, Assurance, Initiative	High value congruence, Interdependence promoted, Opportunities pursued enthusiastically, New initiatives embraced	Relationships highly segmented and bounded, Opportunities pursued with caution, Down-side Risks/Vulnerabilities Continually Monitored
Low Trust	Quadrant 3	Quadrant 4
	"Wait and See"	**"Enemy"**
Characterized by No Hope, No Faith, No Confidence, Passivity, Hesitance	Casual Acquaintances, Limited Interdependence, Bounded, Arms-length Transactions, Professional Courtesy	Undesirable events expected, Harmful motives assumed, Interdependence managed, Preemption: Best Offense is a Good Defense, Paranoia
	Low Distrust	**High Distrust**
	Characterized by No Fear, Absence of Skepticism, Absence of Cynicism, Low Monitoring, No Vigilance	Characterized by Fear, Skepticism, Cynicism, Wariness and Watchfulness, Vigilance

Note: Adapted from Lewicki et al., 1998

Although the views of Lewicki et al. regarding trust are intriguing, their work is at the theory-building stage of development. We have not seen any quantitative empirical work that confirms the accuracy of their view of trust and distrust as separate but linked variables. Although it is intriguing to view trust and distrust consistent with their theory, additional research is needed to demonstrate that these are indeed separate variables. Further exploration of the validity of the Lewicki et al. model would be greatly aided by the development of an instrument that would measure trust and distrust as separate variables.

The Connections of Adult Attachment, Trust, and Distrust

Although there is a basis for connecting the constructs of attachment, trust and distrust in order to better understand organizations and their function, there is limited discussion of the constructs in the literature, and these discussions are usually focused within particular academic domains. As a result we have a limited understanding of the possible relationships between trust and distrust. We are also uncertain how best to measure organizational trust and whether key behaviors in the workplace do indeed have a statistically significant influence on organizational trust. The results of our analyses to date may shed some light on these matters.

Antecedents of Trust

John Bowlby, M.D. (1969), an English psychiatrist, is credited with creating attachment theory and contends that childhood attachment to a significant caregiver is biologically rooted and that it is crucial for a child to develop trust. The propensity to trust learned during childhood substantially influences a person's lifetime relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969, 1988). As a result of her research, Klohnen noted that attachment styles developed in childhood tend to be resilient throughout life (Klohnen & Bera, 1998). We have observed individuals in organizations who appear to struggle with fearful attachment. These individuals tend to approach workplace situations with elevated levels of anxiety, and often require extraordinary assurances of safety from their supervisors. Individuals with fearful attachments often also tend to reflexively despise and distrust upper management in organizations. Through our research, we were able to confirm that about 20% of the variance in organizational trust is attributable to adult attachment (Adams, 2004).

Based on the work of Chelune, Petronio, and Pistole, we had expected that emotional self-disclosure (ESD) would also facilitate bonding between individuals in the workplace. Self-disclosure in relationships tends to be

reciprocal and to occur progressively over time, and helps individuals to form friendships and intimate relationships. These friendships and relationships are formed in part through the process of sharing personal and sensitive information with each other in steps that could be viewed as part of a bonding or attachment process. However, we found during our research that ESD had no statistically significant influence on organizational trust in any of our analyses (Adams, 2004), accordingly, we have dropped ESD as a variable from further research consideration.

Statement of the Problem

The literature and research is inconsistent concerning the conceptualization of organizational trust, although usually consistent regarding the importance placed on trust for effective organizational function. Key parts of the discussion of trust in the management and adult learning literature that are now missing are the need to further explore the ambiguities of trust, different ways of measuring trust, possible linkages between trust and distrust, and the need to refine our instruments for measuring key behaviors that may increase organizational trust. In addition, defensive reactions by leaders as observed by Argyris may complicate the conduct of further research (Argyris, 1993). Consistent with defensive responses, leaders in organizations may resist efforts to survey trust within their organizations, in part, because perceived low levels of trust may reflect negatively on their leader's competence, and negatively influence the leader's career trajectory.

Research Questions

Specifically, the authors are continuing to conduct statistical research, focusing on two questions:

1. Are trust and distrust separate but linked variables?
2. Is it useful to measure trust using instruments that explore trust from different vantage points, or can a single instrument serve this purpose?

Method

Instrumentation

As a part of their research, Shockley et al. developed a model consisting of five factors and an instrument consisting of 29 items. The five factors are (a) competence; (b) open and honest communication; (c) concern for employees; (d) reliability; and (e) sharing of common goals, norms, and values. The breach of any one of these factors could damage the individual's perception of trust.

Although the Shockley-Zalabak et al. instrument appears to be useful in measuring organizational trust, we thought that it had some shortcomings. First, although they used structural equations modeling and path analysis to develop a model of organizational trust, job satisfaction, and effectiveness, their discussion of the model is brief. It is not clear what the relationship is among the five trust factors. Second, we found no information showing how the items in their instrument loaded to the factors in their model. Third, we found no factor analysis in their report that displayed the correlations between the factors that make up trust in their model. These three shortcomings raise technical questions regarding the reliability and validity of their instrument.

Despite these challenges, the instrument developed by Shockley and associates was used as one measure for organizational trust. These factors have intuitive appeal, and might provide a starting point especially for leaders who are motivated to reflect upon and possibly adjust their own behaviors to enhance trust in their organizations. Further testing of the instrument and more information regarding its factor structure and the correlations between its factors might be helpful. Because the instrument purports to measure the influence of key behaviors that influence trust, it might help us identify key behaviors that could help leaders endeavoring to build trust in their organizations.

As a result of our research, we also refined an instrument that measures trust in relation to three objects of trust in the workplace: trust in supervisor, trust in peers, and trust in upper level management. We found very good reliability scores for these factors (all were about .90) (Adams, 2004). This is a conceptually different approach to measurement compared to measuring specific organizational factors. It would be useful to have an empirical comparison to explore if the Shockley et al. instrument is measuring the same organizational trust phenomenon in a different way. Identifying behaviors that enhance trust may prove useful as a part of an organizational intervention.

In addition, we prepared 26 items for measuring trust and distrust consistent with the four quadrants of the Lewicki et al. The structure of the draft instrument was designed to test whether a four factor structure could be developed with a separate factor associated with each Quadrant of the model.

Study Procedures

In order to study the Shockley instrument and test our instrument for the Lewicki model, we gathered two convenience samples. We collected survey data from graduate students attending a university in the central area of North Carolina, and another university located in upstate New York. Eighty-six students, including 52 females and 33 males, completed the study survey and all signed the consent form which advised them about the research and voluntary participation. The average age of the students was 30 years, and 63% held a bachelor's degree; 31% held a masters degree. On average, they had spent 3.3 years with their employers and 2.0 years with their supervisor. Fifty-three percent classed themselves as professionals, 29% as administrative staff, 8% as supervisors, and 7% as managers. We recognized the limitation of samples which were drawn from graduate students at two universities, rather than actual work sites, and are currently sampling employees in two Federal offices to refine our instruments.

To assist us with possible revisions to the Shockley instrument, and to further confirm the utility of the instrument previously developed to measure trust based on key relationships, we gathered a second convenience sample. This sample collected data from 94 participants, including 54 females and 40 males enrolled in an executive development program conducted in Eastern Virginia. The participants came from several Federal agencies. The average age of the students was 46 years, and 33% held a bachelor's degree; 47% held a masters degree, and 13% had a doctorate or MD degree. On average, they had spent 11.6 years with their employers and 2.7 years with their supervisor. Fifty-eight percent classed themselves as professionals, 21% as supervisors, 17% as managers, and 1% as administrative staff.

Results from Studies

Our findings are preliminary, and we feel it is premature to draw firm conclusions. We are continuing (as described below) to refine our instruments for measuring trust, and are testing them in workplace settings.

Concerning research question 1, it appears that trust and distrust may be separate though linked variables as postulated by Lewicki, et al. Based on our analyses, we have identified two factors. The first factor identified could be called "bounded trust," which would be consistent with Lewicki's Quadrant 2, "trust but verify." This factor had an alpha score of .764 which is satisfactory. Additional factor analysis also was satisfactory with an Eigenvalue of 3.723, the amount of variance explained was 41.4%, and the items (4) all loaded to the expected factor. The second factor identified could be called "distrust," which would be consistent with Lewicki's Quadrant 4, "enemy." This factor had an alpha score of .739, which is satisfactory. In addition, the second factor (consisting of 5 items) had mostly satisfactory results from additional factor analysis, including an Eigenvalue of 1.278, and the amount of variance explained was 14.2%. However, two of the items in the factor cross-loaded to "bounded trust." In order to further refine the instrument, we have added several experimental items to each factor in order to improve their strength and explanatory capacity. These findings tend to confirm our sense that high levels of distrust are routinely encountered in most organizations, and that management systems such as strategic planning, management controls, and individual performance planning tend to reinforce employee behavior consistent with high levels of distrust.

Concerning research question 2, we found that the Shockley and associates instrument needed further refinement. Specifically, based on our sample drawn at the universities, we found substantial correlations (above the .7 level) among three of their five factors. For example: "honest and open communication" correlated with "caring" at .716 ($p = .000$), and "shared values" correlated with "caring" at .775 ($p = .000$). Factor correlations above the .7 level may indicate that the factors are so heavily overlapping that they do not contribute to more fully understanding the construct that is being measured. The rotated factor matrix (using Varimax) showed that the items of the instrument did not have a "clean" factor structure; there was extensive cross-loading of items. For example, there were 9 items originally identified with "honest and open communication." However, 7 of the 9 items loaded to factors other than honest communication. The extensive cross loading of items in the instrument contributed to the heavy correlations between the factors of the instrument. Based on our analyses, and winnowing of the items in the instrument, as well as adding other experimental items, we were able to identify 3 factors for key behaviors in organizations: honest communication (4 items), reliability (4 items), and safe environment (3 items). The alphas were all satisfactory, ranging from .853 for honest communication to .759 for safety. The factor analysis was mostly satisfactory with the three factors explaining 69% of the variance, only safety had an Eigenvalue of less than 1.0 (.921). The factor structure was mostly clean with only one item cross loading between honest communication and safety. To further refine the instrument we have added experimental items to all three factors as we continue our research and instrument testing.

As expected, based on our prior research, the items (and scales) measuring trust from the perspective of the object of the relationship (supervisor, peers, and upper management) were robust, showing high reliability, and clean factor structure, consistent with our earlier research findings (Adams, 2004). There was substantial correlation between the factors of this instrument and the instrument developed to measure key behaviors for building trust. For example, honest communication correlated with trust in management at the .817 level (p=.000), and "reliability" correlated with trust in supervisor at the .832 level (p=.000). Based on these findings, it appears that employee's trust in upper management depends on the perceived honest communication by upper management. And employees depend on their supervisors to be reliable.

In order to reduce the burden on study participants, we decided to forego additional testing of the instrument for measuring adult attachment styles. Our questionnaire with the questions regarding attachment had a total of 96 questions, and the length of the questionnaire tended to reduce the number of participants willing to complete it. As a result, we were not able to conduct additional statistical analyses which have allowed us to further explore the connections between adult attachment and aspects of organizational trust. We have incorporated some of the items associated with "fear" from the questionnaire with 96 items into the questions now associated with "safe environment," and will use these questions to improve the reliability and explanatory strength of this factor.

Summary and Considerations for Human Resource Development Theory, Research, and Practice

Plans for Additional Research

Research on trust needs to concentrate on arriving at a common conceptual understanding and a framework for exploring the constructs of organizational trust and distrust. In addition, researchers need to build on the work of their colleagues in the field of organizational trust. Finally, more attention should be paid to overall measures than to explaining the variance observed within organizations. Future research on organizational trust and distrust would benefit from an interdisciplinary review of trust and distrust that increases our understanding of these constructs. Our understanding could prompt leaders of organizations to examine and adjust their own behavior in order to enhance trust in their organizations. This understanding could also facilitate interventions in organizations designed to increase trust levels, and contribute to increased productivity and the achievement of strategic goals.

In order to explore the relationships between the three constructs of adult attachment, and organizational trust and distrust, the authors will continue to refine their instruments. Participants in the ongoing research will all be volunteers and the samples will be convenience samples. The data collected will be analyzed using statistical techniques including correlation, factor analysis, and hierarchical multiple regression in order to test the possible connections between trust and productivity in public and private sector organizations. Additional testing of the survey instruments will be completed within six to nine months, and additional analyses will be performed.

Considerations for Practice

Trust is multifaceted and complex. Based on the work of Erikson and Bowlby, we know that the capacity to trust is very important for individual development of satisfying relationships that nurture personal growth. Trust is also crucial for the sharing of information, networking, and implementing changes in the workplace. Trust is also and is one of the keys for individual as well as organizational learning (Reina & Reina, 1999). Unfortunately, we have an incomplete understanding of the nexus between adult attachment and organizational trust and distrust, and organizational behaviors. It is clear that trust is crucial for individual learning, the sharing of information, and the development of productive team relationships. There appears to be a connection among these constructs however, and the discussion in the literature has been fragmented and has been largely confined to particular academic domains. Few authors have ventured into a broader discussion so that the scholarly community could benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the connections among these constructs. When our instruments for measuring trust are refined, we plan to explore the possible connections between organizational trust and productivity.

The Role of Leadership

We have frequently observed during our research that leaders have substantial ambivalence in their willingness to explore trust levels within their organizations. Leaders are often reluctant to explore and learn about trust in their organizations because of defensiveness, a desire to protect their perceived power in the organization, and a desire to buttress their own self esteem. Many leaders view trust as a reflection on their personal capabilities and fitness for leadership, and few are willing to explore and learn about an area where they may receive negative feedback. While understandable from the vantage point of self protection, this defensiveness also reduces the opportunities of both leaders and organizations to learn about trust and possible behavior changes that could increase levels of trust.

How This Research May Contribute to New Knowledge in Human Resource Development

A clearer conceptualization of organizational trust may lead to improved approaches to measurement, and, as a result, a more complete understanding of the ambiguities of organizational behaviors and problems. Findings from the ongoing research could also lead to a better understanding of the contextual factors affecting trust in organizations. This could ultimately better inform broader issues concerning leadership behavior, organizational culture, and the conduct of interventions in organizations to enhance trust, and possibly boost productivity.

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