ABSTRACT

We maintain that two forms of interpersonal trust predict different work behaviors because they tap different psychological systems of self-regulation. We contend also that the two trust forms interact as a function of the ambivalence they jointly produce. Our model was confirmed in a large sample of engineers employed by a Fortune 500 company. Our study extends prior research that presumes an employee integrates all the positive and negative information possessed about another into a single summary trust statistic and then behaves accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal trust in organizations has been studied extensively over the last decade (for recent reviews, see Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie, 2006). Most approaches to trust in organization science presume that the psychological system responsible for trust formation routinely and directly collapses positive and negative trust assessments into an overall evaluation that can be represented as a solitary point on a single continuum that ranges from high trust to low trust (or distrust), which then provides the impetus for trust-related behavior (such as self-protection in the case of low trust) (Colquitt et al., 2007; Schoorman et al., 2007). We contend that this understanding does not adequately capture the psychological processes through which employees evaluate and respond to others in contemporary work settings. Consider the following scenario:

Amelia is an account manager in a small but rapidly growing advertising agency in a highly competitive business environment. David directs the agency’s creative team. Amelia and David are functional peers who must closely coordinate their work efforts in delivering creative solutions to agency clients. Amelia believes David is quite talented in leading his team to develop high quality advertising campaigns and presenting ideas in client meetings. In particular, Amelia thinks
David can be very persuasive in encouraging clients to take risks with their campaigns when they initially seem unduly inclined to “play it safe.” However, Amelia also believes David can be too assertive in pushing his opinions in meetings, sometimes to the point where he undermines her own and the agency’s relationships with clients.  

David embodies behavioral potentialities in client meetings that Amelia not only fears (e.g., he can be pushy with clients) and would be prudent to defend against but also values (e.g., he can be highly persuasive) and would be wise to leverage. In this way, employees exhibit a rich amalgam of faults and virtues in their work relationships, and thus they can be sources of great confidence and consternation for one another (Gabarro, 1978; Lewicki, McAllister & Bies, 1998). The threats and opportunities that David represents to Amelia are inextricably co-present within their relational context, seeming to present Amelia with a thorny trust-related conundrum. But, mainstream trust scholarship presumes that Amelia’s highly positive and highly negative assessments of David would average out, leaving her with a mid-range level of trust in David.

We challenge this conventional thinking in the organizational trust literature. Our approach is inspired by scholarship in the broader social sciences on approach-avoidance self-regulation and psychological ambivalence that shows people can hold positive and negative appraisals of others simultaneously and that, when this state of ambivalence occurs, people’s behavior toward those others can be shaped by the countervailing evaluations per se (e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Elliot & Sheldon, 1998; Gray, 1987; Higgins, 1997; Pratt & Doucet, 2000; Priester & Petty, 1996). For research on interpersonal trust, this work implies that the positive and negative aspects of an employee’s trust assessment of another (e.g., their coworkers and managers) may not be inevitably or even usually integrated. Rather, they may remain separate and carry independent effects. Amelia’s highly positive and highly negative trust assessments of David may lead her to work with him in a way that is simultaneously and decidedly self-protective and cooperative in its orientation. We maintain that employees contend with the prospects and perils of their professional work relationships via a broader, more nuanced, and possibly more adaptive set of responses than has heretofore been acknowledged in the trust literature.

SYSTEMS OF SELF-REGULATION AND TYPES OF TRUST

Systems of Self-Regulation

The general psychological mechanism governing the formation of appraisals and the corresponding development of behavioral strategies toward appraisal objects, such as other people, involves two somewhat distinct self-regulation systems (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Elliot & Sheldon, 1998; Gable, Reis & Elliot, 2003; Gray, 1987; Higgins, 1997). Various labels have been used to describe and distinguish between them, including appetitive and aversive (Gray, 1987), promotion- and prevention-focus (Higgins, 1997), behavioral activation and behavioral inhibition systems (Carver & White, 1994; Gable, Reis & Elliot, 2000), positivity and negativity (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997), and approach and avoidance self-regulation.

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1 Based on the Harvard Business School Publishing case “Amelia Rogers at Tassani Communications” (revised 1995) prepared by Melinda B. Conrad under the supervision of Linda A. Hill.
(Elliot & Church, 1997). The two systems in combination influence how employees pursue
generalized work goals, such as job performance and career success (Brockner & Higgins, 2001;

The avoidance self-regulation system is tuned to threat information (i.e., information
involving self-relevant punishment and loss, such as being terminated from a job), which
activates safety and security needs, engenders negativity (e.g., anxiety), heightens vigilance and
roused concern for self protection (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Gray, 1987; Higgins, 1997). The
model implies, for instance, that the negative aspect of Amelia’s assessment of David in the
scenario above is likely to raise security concerns and generate anxiety that motivates Amelia to
protect herself against David’s potentially problematic behavior.

The approach self-regulation system is tuned to opportunity information (i.e., information
involving self-relevant rewards and gains, such as being promoted) that activates achievement
needs and motivates achievement striving, positivity reactions (e.g., gratification), and eagerness
to discover and capitalize on prospects for growth and achievement (Brockner & Higgins, 2001;
Brockner et al., 2003). Mutual cooperation and coordination are fundamental routes to both
personal and collective growth and accomplishment at work (Barnard, 1938; Katz & Kahn,
1966; Thompson, 1967). The positive aspect of Amelia’s assessment of David highlights
achievement possibilities that give rise to the anticipation of reward and gratification, motivating
Amelia to support and cooperate with David to make the most of David’s potentially valuable
contributions to their collective effort.

Beyond their independent effects, positive and negative evaluations may jointly influence
self-regulation. The co-presence of positive and negative evaluations represents a state of
psychological ambivalence (Cacioppo et al., 1997; Kaplan, 1972; Pratt & Doucett, 2000; Priester
& Petty, 1996; Smelser, 1998; Thompson & Zanna, 1995). Psychological ambivalence is an
aversive condition motivating action to alleviate the emotional discomfort (Jonas, Diehl, &
Bromer, 1997; Maio, Bell, & Esses, 1996; Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002; Nordgren,
van Harreveld, & van der Pligt, 2006). The evaluative contradictions are understood to be a
source of emotional discomfort beyond the discomfort associated with the negative evaluations
themselves (Aaker, Drolet & Griffin, 2008; Williams & Aaker, 2002). In general, negative
emotions signal that the situation is particularly problematic—i.e., threatening, dangerous,
strange, or otherwise unsatisfactory. Negative emotions promote, for instance, the vigilant
attention and careful and deliberate information processing (Clore, Schwartz & Conway, 1994;
Forgas, 2000; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Martin, Ward, Achee, & Wyer, 1993; Schwarz,
1990; 2002; Schwartz & Clore, 1983) that guide the development of avoidance strategies for
escaping threat (Gable et al., 2003). Thus, ambivalence aligns with the avoidance self-regulation
system. Accordingly, Amelia’s strategy for working with David may also include making an
audio recording of meetings (additional avoidance behavior) to “cover her back” with her
managers should David alienate a client despite her best efforts to prevent this outcome.

Self-Regulatory Effects of Two Forms of Trust

Two major approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing trust are prominent in
organization science (Colquitt et al., 2007; McEvily et al., 2003; Perrone, Zaheer, & McEvily,
2003; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer 1998). The first approach, the vulnerability perspective
(we label this Trust_v), defines trust as one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Mishra, 1996; Sabel, 1982; Zand, 1972), where “being vulnerable implies that there is something of importance to be lost” (Mayer et al., 1995: 712). On this account, trust appraisals are formed in the context of concerns for safety and security within a relationship. They revolve around an individual’s explicit realization that something meaningful is at stake in interactions with another and that, as a result, one could be harmed by the other (e.g., Kee & Knox, 1970). In fact, Trust_v has relevance only insofar as the trustor appreciates the possibility of trustee betrayal or malfeasance (Gambetta, 1988). The nature and extent of vulnerability to another in a relationship are considered highly salient aspects of Trust_v. When Trust_v is high, people are willingly vulnerable to relationship partners in the face of explicit recognition of hazards and threats.

The second approach, the confidence perspective perspective (we label this Trust_c) conceptualizes trust as one party’s confident positive expectation regarding the conduct of another (Barber, 1983; Becker, 1996; Cook & Wall, 1980; Holmes, 2002; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Luhmann, 1979; McAllister, 1995; Perrone et al., 2003; Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Trust_c appraisals are grounded mainly in the affirmative qualities of a relationship partner. Vulnerability concerns are more peripheral to Trust_c than to Trust_v. Given confident positive expectations, people may not fully appreciate, or even contemplate at all, the extent to which they are actually at risk from, or vulnerable to, the trusted others with whom they interact—at least not until after a major trust breach has taken place (e.g., Garfinkel, 1963; Holmes, 1991). Trust_c is expected neither to emerge from nor to be sustained by, active reflection on the risks of interdependence with others.

The differences in how the two forms of trust are conceptualized suggest that Trust_v and Trust_c likely carry distinct self-regulatory effects. Trust_v appraisals are based on information concerning the relative presence (or absence) of the potential for harm from another organization member. When Trust_v is low, threat and safety concerns predominate (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Low Trust_v produces anxiety that provides impetus for vigilance and defensiveness. However, while the mounting anxiety associated with declining Trust_v is predicted to motivate employees to develop and implement self-protection strategies, the declining anxiety (i.e., increasing quiescence) that accompanies rising Trust_v is not expected to explicitly motivate approach behavior, such as cooperation in organizations. In contrast, Trust_c appraisals are based on information about the relative presence or absence of the potential for support and encouragement from another person. When Trust_c is high, the other is viewed as a resource for accomplishment at work (Burt, 2000; McAllister, 1995). Thus, the actual or anticipated experience of gratification from work-related achievement is high. Organization members are eager to seek out and capitalize on opportunities for constructive contribution. However, the decreasing activation of achievement needs accompanying declining Trust_c is not expected to motivate avoidance behavior. This reasoning leads to the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Trust_v is negatively and uniquely associated with avoidance behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Trust_c is positively and uniquely associated with approach behavior.

Our model is not at odds with this prior research linking both Trust_v and Trust_c to avoidance and approach behaviors. When either of the two forms of trust is considered in
isolation, it may be associated with both types of behaviors because the two underlying systems of self-regulation are somewhat overlapping. When considered simultaneously, however, Trust\textsubscript{v} and Trust\textsubscript{c} should explain unique variance in avoidance and approach behaviors, respectively.

We proposed above that Trust\textsubscript{v} and Trust\textsubscript{c} orient employees somewhat differently to others because they tap different systems of self-regulation. Accordingly, when Trust\textsubscript{v} is low and Trust\textsubscript{c} is high, appraisals are oppositional. An employee is concerned about vulnerability to another person yet also is confident in the other. These countervailing trust assessments reflect a state of ambivalence, which carries an aversive emotional experience in its own right (beyond that associated with low Trust\textsubscript{v} alone). Consequently, we predict that Trust\textsubscript{v} and Trust\textsubscript{c} will interact to increase avoidance (and not approach) behavior. That is, the ambivalence associated with low Trust\textsubscript{v} and high Trust\textsubscript{c} will boost the motivational output of the avoidance self-regulation system. This reasoning suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The negative relationship between Trust\textsubscript{v} and avoidance behavior will be stronger when Trust\textsubscript{c} is high than when Trust\textsubscript{v} is low and avoidance behavior will be highest when Trust\textsubscript{v} is low and Trust\textsubscript{c} is high.

METHODS

The hypothesized effects of Trust\textsubscript{v} and Trust\textsubscript{c} are not expected to vary according to whether the trustee is a supervisor or a co-worker (Colquitt et al., 2007). Studying employees’ trust in their supervisors is an appropriate initial focus for empirical testing, as supervisors’ hierarchical positioning might lead to more variance in both willingness to be vulnerable and confident positive expectations (cf., Tyler & Lind, 1992).

Participants and Procedure: A sample of 212 engineers and their immediate supervisors from an oil refinery division of a Fortune 500 company located in India participated in this study. Participants were responsible for the design and operation of measurement instruments used in the refinery’s automated systems. Subject were fluent in English, predominantly male (96%) and well educated (64% had obtained at least an undergraduate university degree). They averaged 31 years of age and 5.6 years of experience in the organization. Trust information was collected from engineers as focal respondents; behavior information was collected from their supervisors.

Measures: Trust as a willingness to be vulnerable (Trust\textsubscript{v}), adapted from Mayer and Davis’ (1999), consisted of three items: “If I had my way, I wouldn’t let him have any influence over issues that are important to me,” “It would be essential for me to have a good way to keep an eye on him,” and “Increasing my vulnerability to him would be a mistake.” Trust as confident positive expectations (Trust\textsubscript{c}) was measured with three items patterned after Read (1962): “I am confident that he would use opportunities that come up to further my interests by his actions and decisions,” “I feel secure in the knowledge that he is there for me,” and “Looking to the future, his presence is a source of reassurance.” The reliability estimate (Cronbach \(\alpha\)) for both Trust\textsubscript{v} and Trust\textsubscript{c} was .88. Supervisor assessments of defensive behavior (avoidance self-regulation) and interpersonal helping (approach self-regulation) were captured with three items each, all drawn from McAllister (1995). Reliability estimates (Cronbach \(\alpha\)) for defensive behavior and interpersonal helping constructs were .86 and .92, respectively. Finally, we included propensity
to trust (Mayer & Davis, 1999), risk propensity (Dulebohn, 2001), and reputational effectiveness (Tsui, 1984) as controls, with reliability estimates of .93, .80, and .93, respectively.

RESULTS

We found that Trustv was negatively correlated with defensiveness (r=.47, p<.01) and Trustc was not (r=.01, ns). OLS regression results showed that beyond controls and Trustc (which was not significant), Trustv remained a strong predictor of defensiveness (β =-.35, p<.01 in Table 3). We also found that Trustc was positively correlated with interpersonal helping (r=.40, p<.01) and Trustv was not (r=.06, ns). Furthermore, after controls and Trustv, (which was not significant), Trustc remained a significant predictor of interpersonal helping (β=.33, p<.01). Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were fully supported.

Results of moderated regression analyses revealed that, beyond main-effects, the interaction of Trustc and Trustv was a significant predictor of defensive behavior (β=.14, p<.05; ΔR²=.02, p<.05). The form of the interaction (plotted in the Figure) was consistent with what we had predicted. Hypothesis 3 was fully supported.

DISCUSSION

Our study advances trust scholarship by demonstrating the usefulness of modeling trust and its behavioral outcomes as a joint function of the approach and avoidance self-regulation systems, which are distinct but interconnected. Our work suggests that the predictive power of trust models can be improved with judicious matching of trust forms and behavioral outcomes. While approach behaviors (e.g., spontaneity, innovation, and citizenship) are likely to be predicted best by Trustc, avoidance behaviors (e.g., defensiveness, policy adherence, and withholding of information) are likely to be predicted by Trustv, and jointly by Trustv and Trustc.

Our finding that Trustv and Trustc interact in predicting avoidance (and not approach) behaviors further advances trust scholarship in so much as the idea that high Trustc leads to more defensive behavior under certain circumstances (i.e., when Trustv is low) is considered counter-intuitive from the perspective of existing research. Our reasoning was that the inconsistency between low Trustv and high Trustc generates psychological distress to which the avoidance system is tuned, providing supplementary motivation for threat-focused responding. Thus, our study highlights the importance of the concept of psychological ambivalence in trust research.

Consensus is emerging in the trust literature that Trustv and Trustc are vital components of a more general trust construct (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2007; Rousseau et al., 1998; McEvily et al., 2003). But, the trend has been to fuse the trust forms into a single definition such that the individual components are not accorded distinctive explanatory roles (e.g., Rousseau et al., 1998: 395). Our theory and findings caution against this approach.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE FIRST AUTHOR