



The relative influence of trustor and trustee individual differences on peer assessments of trust[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study extends research on the antecedents of peer trust by examining team member trust relationships over time in order to examine the relative influence of both trustor and trustee individual differences on assessments of trust, as well as the mutual nature of trust. Data from 216 individuals embedded in 71 project teams were collected on three different occasions using multiple sources. Analyses using the group actor-partner interdependence model indicated both trustor and trustee cognitive and noncognitive individual differences including general mental ability, knowledge, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience contributed to being trusted and trusting others. Trust among team members was mutual within, but not across time periods. This study expands our understanding of peer trust by revealing the relative importance of trustor and trustee individual differences.

1. Introduction

With increasing collaboration, research illuminating the variables that contribute to the development and sustainability of trust is critical to effective working relationships between peers and within teams. In response, researchers have contributed extensively to our understanding of trust, as fundamentally interpersonal, dyadic, and reciprocal (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). Additionally, trustee's individual differences are related to team members trust (e.g., Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Furthermore, trust develops over time (De Jong & Dirks, 2012), changes over time (Webber, 2008), and initial trust influences subsequent trust (Korsgaard, Brower, & Lester, 2015).

Our study addresses three interrelated theoretical and methodological challenges in the current trust literature by investigating how individual differences affect trust from both the trustor, the person who trusts, and the trustee, the person who is trusted. First, trust research has largely focused on the development of trust in leaders (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), rather than trust between peers. When researchers have examined trust among team members, trust is conceptualized and measured as an *aggregated* entity. This approach ignores potential trust differences between team members (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012).

Second, research on interpersonal trust has yet to distinguish

between the trustor's and the trustee's individual differences. The present study expands our understanding of peer trust by investigating the direct impact of trustor and trustee individual differences on trusting others' perceptions and being trusted, simultaneously. This research design allows for a unique analytical approach using the group actor-partner interdependence model (GAPIM). By investigating each, simultaneously, the unique influence of each individual's characteristics on trusting and being trusted can be independently estimated.

Third, most trust researchers rely on Mayer et al.'s (1995) taxonomy of trustworthiness predictors which includes both cognitive and non-cognitive constructs. However, examining these constructs limits the extent to which trust research can be integrated into and inform other literatures and vice versa. Integrating Mayer et al.'s theoretical framework with Big Five research, we make conceptual linkages between various constructs and expand the nomological network of the antecedents of trust.

Finally, individual differences are frequently indirectly assessed. Instead, trustors simultaneously provide their ratings of trust and perceptions of team members' individual differences. Thus, these studies suffer from both single-source and common method bias (e.g., Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). To address this concern, we directly assess trustor and trustee individual differences.

To address these gaps, this study (1) examines all possible dyadic

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permutations of trust within a team at multiple time points, (2) assesses unique effects of both trustor and trustee individual differences, and (3) assesses individual differences independently from trust ratings using different sources.

2. Interpersonal trust

Trust is a psychological state reflecting the “extent to which a person is confident in and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another” (McAllister, 1995, p. 25). Trust is focused on an individual trustee, and therefore varies both between and across relationships. Both trustor and trustee individual differences are predicted to be important antecedents of trust. Previous research has primarily examined the trustor’s general willingness or propensity to trust others (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). However, there are weak correlations between trusting others and being trusted, and that the predictors of trusting are not necessarily the same as being trusted (Evans & Revelle, 2008; Malhotra, 2004). In this study, we examine five theoretically-relevant predictors of trust: general mental ability (GMA), task-relevant knowledge, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness.¹

In collaborative work settings, building and sustaining trust are particularly important for the success of a project. Correspondingly, identifying predictors of both trusting and being trusted are important. We propose that *both* trustee and trustor individual differences will impact trust over time in collaborative work situations, as researchers have demonstrated a substantial amount of the variance in ratings is attributable to the rater (e.g., Woehr, Sheehan, & Bennett, 2005).

Prior trust research has focused largely on what would be considered “trustor-effects”, or the extent to which the trustor’s characteristics influence her trust in others (Dirks & Skarlicki, 2008; Mayer et al., 1995). For example, an individual may be trusted by her peers because that particular individual is agreeable (i.e., trustee effect), or because the *trustor* is agreeable (i.e., a trustor effect). In contrast, GAPIM controls for shared variance at the dyad-level allowing researchers to more directly examine the influence of each trustee’s individual differences on their rating of trust within each dyad.

3. Cognitive individual differences and trust

Trust research suggests that individuals with greater intellectual abilities, competence, and expertise are perceived as more trustworthy (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). Correspondingly, high GMA individuals have the ability to learn the skills necessary to perform successfully (Schmidt & Hunter, 2004).

Broader than GMA, knowledge reflects one’s cognitive expertise at a more specific level. Knowledge is a robust predictor of performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 2004), and likely influences perceptions of an individual’s competence which are associated with perceptions of trustworthiness (McAllister, 1995). Previous research supports the relationship between a trustee’s competence with trust (Butler, 1991).

Hypothesis 1. Trustee GMA will positively relate to being trusted.

Hypothesis 2. Knowledge will positively relate to being trusted.

4. Non-cognitive individual differences and trust

Mayer et al. (1995) identified integrity as a key predictor of trustworthiness. Conscientiousness reflects tendencies toward rule compliance and obedience (Hogan & Ones, 1997). Because conscientious individuals tend to work hard and persevere on tasks, they are often

¹ Although we included them for completeness and results are available from the first author, we did not hypothesize about extraversion or neuroticism due to lack of theoretical relevance and basis.

described as dependable and responsible (Costa & McCrae, 1992), even specifically as “person[s] of integrity” (Hogan & Ones, 1997, p. 865).

Hypothesis 3. Trustee conscientiousness will positively relate to being trusted.

Mayer et al.’s (1995) third predictor was benevolence, which aligns with agreeableness. Agreeable individuals are considerate, likable, cooperative, and helpful (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Agreeable team members are often viewed positively in collaborative settings, because they contribute to functional interpersonal environments through congenial behavior (Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007), are less likely to social loaf, and more likely to contribute positively to work processes (Stewart, Fulmer, & Barrick, 2005).

Hypothesis 4. Trustee agreeableness will positively relate to being trusted.

Trustor agreeableness is also likely to contribute to initial assessments of trust. Agreeable individuals are trusting and trustworthy (McCrae & Costa Jr, 2008), by both extending and engendering trust (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Agreeable people have a need to “get along” (cf. Hogan & Holland, 2003), seek out interpersonal relationships (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997), and foster harmonious relationships. They tend to be trustworthy and cooperative—expecting others to be the same (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Research suggests that the propensity to trust may even be conceptualized as a facet of agreeableness (Mooradian, Renzl, & Matzler, 2006).

Hypothesis 5. Trustor agreeableness will positively relate to trusting others.

Openness refers to greater imagination, independent judgment, and unconventional thinking (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Individuals who are described as having a high level of openness are considered to be original, imaginative, and open-minded (McCrae & Costa, 1987). In this study, project teams were tasked with designing a novel product and then creating a prototype of it. Group members who are high in openness are more receptive to new ideas and adaptable and attune to the behavioral changes required in team performance environments (LePine, 2003), thus promoting trust by others.

Hypothesis 6. Trustee openness to experience will positively relate to being trusted.

Trustor openness to experience is also expected to influence assessments of trust. Trustors high in openness are likely to welcome novel experiences with less anxiety (Costa & McCrae, 1992), be more tolerant with the unfamiliar (Tesch & Cameron, 1987), and encourage others to share more information (Cuperman & Ickes, 2009). An open peer is likely to provide team members the opportunities to share, resulting in greater trust.

Hypothesis 7. Trustor openness to experience will positively relate to being trusted.

5. Mutual and cross-lagged trust

As group members get to know one another, they are likely to infer the extent to which they are trusted by other group members. Correspondingly, trust fluctuates over time (Webber, 2008). Healthy interpersonal relationships are marked by mutual trust, although empirical assessments tend to reveal relatively weak relationships between being trusted and trusting others (Evans & Revelle, 2008; Malhotra, 2004). This may be a function of the indirect measurement of being trusted in previous studies.

Hypothesis 8. Being trusted will positively relate to trusting others.

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