



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Trust toward a group of strangers as a function of stereotype-based social identification

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 July 2016

Received in revised form 9 February 2017

Accepted 13 March 2017

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Trust
Stereotype
Social identification
Facial trustworthiness
Warmth
Competence

ABSTRACT

Individuals often have to decide whether to trust others at zero or little acquaintance. In this instance, individuals rely on social stereotypes as a guide to their trust decisions. Yet little is known regarding how social cues lead to trust. The present research examines the stereotype-based social identification mechanism through which the facial trustworthiness of a group of strangers determines an individual's trust toward the group. Two experimental studies showed that group warmth (rather than competence or dominance) stereotypes and subsequent self-group merging (inclusion of the group in the self-representation) fully mediated the effect of group facial trustworthiness on trust toward the group at zero acquaintance, whether the level of trust was linked with pecuniary rewards or not. The current findings contribute to the emerging literature on trust at zero or little acquaintance.

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Trust is critical for interpersonal and intergroup coordination and cooperation (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003). Research has largely focused on interpersonal or intergroup trust, and rarely investigated an individual's trust toward a group of people. Yet modern society involves frequent interactions among strangers and requires the extension of trust networks (Delhey, Newton, & Welzel, 2011; Realo, Allik, & Greenfield, 2008). Thus, individuals often have to decide whether to trust a group of people at zero or little acquaintance. For instance, investors may decide whether to trust a group of entrepreneurs about whom they have little prior knowledge, and new leaders hired from another organization may decide whether to trust their new management group.

An individual's trust ensues from knowledge-based social identification with a target (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006). When an individual and a target have a stable relationship, the individual's social identification is based on the relationship. However, at little or zero acquaintance, an individual's social identification with a target is stereotype-based (Foddy, Platow, & Yamagishi, 2009), that is, based on the individual's stereotypes of the target and subsequent perception of themselves in relation to the target (Turner, 1982, 1985).

Recent research has investigated how facial characteristics (e.g., width) influence trust at little or zero acquaintance (e.g., Stirrat & Perrett, 2010). A face, with both objective (e.g., objectively measured width) and subjective characteristics (e.g., perceived facial traits), is a critical source of information about traits and intentions (Frith & Frith, 1999). Snap judgment of facial traits can be accurate in predicting

important outcomes such as corporate profits and political election results (e.g., Rule & Ambady, 2008; Rule et al., 2010). In the current research, I focus on facial trustworthiness. Trustworthiness entails competence and warmth (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), which are the universal dimensions of social stereotypes (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Research on facial traits has largely investigated warmth and dominance/power stereotypes as parallel factors, finding that dominance/power stereotypes are more predictive of some outcomes than warmth stereotypes (e.g., Rule et al., 2010). Rarely has research on facial traits investigated warmth and competence stereotypes simultaneously.

The current research addresses how competence and warmth stereotypes concurrently explain the implication of strangers' group facial trustworthiness for an individual's trust decision. Similar to previous research (e.g., Acar-Burkay, Fennis, & Warlop, 2014), I adopt a Trust Game (Berg, Dickhaut, & McCabe, 1995) to investigate (behavioral) trust. However, I focus on an individual's trust toward a group of strangers rather than toward another individual and explicitly test stereotype-based social identification as a (mediating) mechanism translating a group's facial trustworthiness to an individual's trust toward the group. Simply put, the aim of the present research is to examine how group warmth and competence stereotypes and subsequent self-group merging (social identification) mediate the effect of a group's facial trustworthiness on an individual's trust toward the group, and in testing this double-mediation effect, group facial trustworthiness will be experimentally manipulated in four levels, trust will be indicated by the decision made in a Trust Game, and the remaining variables will be measured. The findings will shed light on the psychological underpinnings of trust at zero or little acquaintance.

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Please cite this article as: Kong, D.T., Trust toward a group of strangers as a function of stereotype-based social identification, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.031>

1. Stereotype-based social identification in response to group facial trustworthiness

When individuals lack good information about a target, they are likely to rely on social stereotypes to bridge the gap (Foddy et al., 2009). Stereotypes, as pre-conceived, over-generalized ideas typifying an individual, a group of individuals, and so forth, conserve cognitive resources and expedite information processing (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). Stereotypes help individuals make sense of the target's current states and guide individuals' reactions toward the target (Macrae et al., 1994). Stereotypes can be categorized along the dimensions of warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2008), two defining dimensions of trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995). Warmth stereotypes pertain to targets' intentions in a specific context and to targets' traits such as morality, sincerity, and friendliness, whereas competence stereotypes pertain to targets' ability to enact the intentions and to targets' traits such as efficacy, intelligence, and confidence (Cuddy et al., 2008). Warmth is a more critical determinant of trust than competence (Kong, 2015), presumably because warmth judgment often precedes competence judgment (Cuddy, Kohut, & Neffinger, 2013).

Stereotypes are activated by relevant social cues such as facial cues (e.g., Mason, Cloutier, & Macrae, 2006). Facial traits, such as facial trustworthiness, can activate warmth and competence stereotypes. Todorov, Oosterhof, and colleagues (e.g., Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008; Todorov, Said, Engell, & Oosterhof, 2008) found that facial traits can be evaluated along two dimensions – trustworthiness (valence) and dominance (power). As the primary dimension, one's facial trustworthiness conveys the valence of one's facial traits, and has a prominent effect on others' emotional reactions and implicit judgment (e.g., Engell, Haxby, & Todorov, 2007). Previous research has shown that one's implicit judgment of facial trustworthiness could translate into trust in a Trust Game (Rezlescu, Duchaine, Olivola, & Chater, 2012; Van't Wout & Sanfey, 2008).

Warmth and competence stereotypes of a target, in turn, determines how an individual mentally represents himself/herself in relation to the target or the degree to which the target is included in the individual's self-representation (i.e., self-other merging; e.g., Batson et al., 1997), which is a defining component of social identification (e.g., De Cremer & Stouten, 2003; Smith, Coats, & Walling, 1999). Self-other merging is significant to individuals as it can help individuals build personal resources and acquire rewards (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Individuals are motivated to nurture a rewarding or satisfying connection with another individual or a group of individuals whom they can include in their self-representations (Aron et al., 1992). Therefore, at zero or little acquaintance, individuals' stereotype-based social identification shapes their representation of a group of strangers in relation to themselves (i.e., self-group merging) and subsequent trust toward the group.

2. Study 1

2.1. Participants

A total of 214 U.S. participants (64% female) recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) completed the online study in exchange for pecuniary compensation, none of whom was excluded. Only if participants met three requirements (i.e., currently living in the U.S., fluent in English, and 18 years old or above) were they allowed to participate in the study. The current sample size was much larger than those of published research on trust toward strangers (e.g., Foddy et al., 2009) and on facial traits and trust (e.g., van't Wout & Sanfey, 2008), and therefore, it was expected to render sufficient statistical power. About 72% of the participants were White/Caucasian, 10% Black/African descent, 7% Asian, 7% Hispanic/Latino, the remaining 4% other ethnicities. Most of them (85%) received at least some college education. Their average age was 37.70 years ($SD = 13.73$) and average work experience 15.91 years ($SD = 13.16$).

2.2. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, which varied in the level of group facial trustworthiness determined by the facial trustworthiness composition of a three-person (White/Caucasian males) group (1 = three untrustworthy faces, 2 = two untrustworthy faces and one trustworthy face, 3 = one untrustworthy face and two trustworthy faces, and 4 = three trustworthy faces). The three individuals' facial pictures were generated by Todorov, Oosterhof, and colleagues (Todorov, Dotsch, Porter, Oosterhof, & Falvello, 2013; Todorov & Oosterhof, 2011) using FaceGen Modeller (<http://facegen.com>) Version 3.1.¹ The advantage of using the computer-generated facial pictures instead of pictures taken in natural settings is that the former conveyed maximally manipulated trustworthiness orthogonal to dominance, whereas the latter could not effectively tease facial trustworthiness apart from dominance. Participants were told that the three individuals shown in the picture worked in the same group, and to protect their individual identities, some of their identifying or idiosyncratic facial characteristics were stripped away from the pictures.

After viewing the three members' facial pictures, participants indicated their stereotypes of the group's competence, warmth, dominance, trustworthiness (manipulation checks), physical attractiveness (control), age (control), and socioeconomic status (SES; control). Then they indicated their self-group merging and trust toward the group. Finally, participants reported their dispositional tendencies that might determine trust (control variables), including trust propensity, social motives, need for closure, regulatory focus, and Big Five personality. Once completing the study, participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid.

2.3. Key measures

2.3.1. Manipulation check

Participants indicated the extent to which they felt that the group, as a whole, was trustworthy on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

2.3.2. Group competence, warmth, and dominance stereotypes

Participants indicated the extent to which they felt that the group, as a whole, had each of the given traits on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Five traits pertained to group competence ("competent," "confident," "capable," "intelligent," and "skillful"; $\alpha = 0.91$), five traits group warmth ("friendly," "good-natured," "warm," "well-intentioned," and "sincere"; $\alpha = 0.91$), and three traits group dominance ("dominant," "threatening," and "angry"; $\alpha = 0.75$). The competence and warmth items were adapted from those of Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002), and the dominance items were similar to those used by Said, Sebe, and Todorov (2009). I included group dominance stereotypes as a mechanism parallel to group competence and warmth stereotypes in order to rule out the alternative explanation that group dominance stereotypes mediate the effect of group facial trustworthiness on social identification and subsequent trust.

2.3.3. Self-group merging

Participants indicated their self-representation in relation to the three-person group, using a single-item, seven-point pictorial measure adapted from Aron et al.'s (1992) Inclusion of the Other in the Self (IOS) scale (e.g., Schubert & Otten, 2002), which has satisfactory psychometric features, including reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, predictive validity, and minimal social desirability concern (see Aron et al., 1992).

¹ The following six pictures were used: "nexus2_15_tw_-3.00," "nexus2_19_tw_-3.00," "nexus2_25_tw_-3.00," "nexus2_15_tw_3.00," "nexus2_19_tw_3.00," and "nexus2_25_tw_3.00."

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