

The psychology of interpersonal trust

How people feel when it comes to trusting someone

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Author Note

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### Abstract

This study seeks to better understand the reasons as to how interpersonal trust occurs through males and females. The hypothesis states that male college students have more difficulty trusting than female college students. One hundred students from a Midwestern university participated in the study. An 18-item questionnaire was compiled using questions from the Trust Scale (trust w/in close interpersonal relationships) (Rempel, Holmes, Zanna, 1985). There was one independent variable (gender) and one dependent variable (trusting). In the future this work can serve as the starting block for research into what allows a person to trust another person, in any relationship.

*Keywords:* interpersonal trust, male, female

## The psychology of interpersonal trust

### How people feel when it comes to trusting someone

Interpersonal trust is defined as the perception you have that other people will not do anything that will harm your interest; the individual is giving the willingness to accept vulnerability or risk based on expectations regarding another person's behavior. Trusting is vital in everyday human reaction, which has the ability to affect our interactions with others both with good or bad interactions, as well as with friends and foe. When taking a look at trust, there are two types of trusters; the low trusters and the high trusters. If an individual is a low truster they have the tendency to not trust others until they have clear evidence that they can be trusted. On the other hand the high truster is seen as more likely to be fooled. The high truster has the degree of willingness to believe stranger in absence of clear data. Gullibility is in conjunction with those individuals who have the ability to trust easier. It is stated that a gullible person trusts others until they have clear evidence that they cannot be trusted. Studies show that a gullible person, or a high truster, is less likely to lie or cheat or steal, more likely to give second chance, and more likely to respect the rights of others.

### **Gender differences**

In a review of the literature Cross and Madson (1997) proposed that a number of previously documented gender differences could be explained in terms of differences in self-construals: while men may have more of an independent construal of self, women may have more of an interdependent construal of self (Maddux & Brewer, 2005). Cross and Madson (1997) reviewed a variety of evidence in support of this hypothesis (Maddux & Brewer, 2005). For example, they noted that while women often describe themselves more in terms of

relationships with others, men have a stronger tendency to describe themselves in terms of separateness from others (Maddux & Brewer, 2005). While men may indeed be more independent than women, at the interdependent level men may also place a greater importance on group memberships and large collectives (Maddux & Brewer, 2005). In other words, in terms of the way in which people feel a sense of interdependence with others, women may be more relationally oriented, men may be more collectively oriented. Gender differences impact the way in which people feel a sense of interdependence with others and define their ingroups (Maddux & Brewer, 2005). Compared to men, women place more emphasis on relationships and interpersonal connections, while men are more likely to emphasize more depersonalized group memberships and the importance of group identity (Maddux & Brewer, 2005). If there are indeed reliable gender differences in relational and collective interdependence, these differences should also manifest themselves in situations where men and women must decide whether or not to trust other people, particularly strangers (Maddux & Brewer, 2005). Although the concept of trust has always been an integral aspect of research in social psychology, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in trust as a central psychological construct (Maddux & Brewer, 2005).

### **Evolution of Trust and Distrust**

Despite these contributions, the relationships between trust and formalization remain far from clear and much theoretical input is still needed to understand how they work as governance mechanisms (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Trust encompasses not only the belief in the ability of a partner organization to accomplish a task but also the belief in the goodwill or positive intentions of this partner and the perception that it adheres to acceptable values (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Although trust and distrust are sometimes viewed as two ends of a continuum, several scholars acknowledge that they are separate but related constructs

we therefore define *distrust* as “confident negative expectations regarding another’s conduct” (p. 439) that manifest themselves in fear, vigilance, or suspicion (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Distrust thus derives from the negative hypothetical possibility regarding a partner’s behavior and actions (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). It is contended that trust and distrust coexist, not only because partners can trust each other in one respect and distrust each other regarding other issues (Lewicki et al., 1998) but also because partners may cultivate trust and distrust at the same time so as to reap the benefits from both and to compensate for the weaknesses associated with each of them individually (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Certain combinations of trust and distrust may be most beneficial to interorganizational cooperation than others (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). As we argue that trust, distrust, and formal coordination and control affect interorganizational performance and the interpretation that managers give to their partners’ behavior, we also define these constructs here (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Interorganizational performance concerns both “the degree of accomplishment of the partners’ goals . . . and the extent to which their pattern of interactions is acceptable to the partners” (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). A large body of literature proposes that trust may act as a substitute for formal control, as higher degrees of trust reduce the need for control (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Trust also exhibits a positive relationship with formalization, in that higher degrees of trust enable higher levels of formal coordination and control (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Trust facilitates open communication and negotiations on the details of contracts, “including the thorny sensitive clauses like relationship termination” (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Trust enables parties to record aspects of their relationships in formal contracts and other formal documents (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). Distrust, instead, entails low degrees of

information exchange and limited opportunities for observing and learning from partners (Maguire et al., 2001), which reduce their possibilities to formalize the relationship (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007). We contend that the enabling character of trust and the restricting nature of distrust pertain to both formalization's coordination function and its control function (Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007).

### **Bases of trust**

According to the framework, there are three fundamental bases of interpersonal trust; reliability, which refers to the fulfillment of word or promise; emotional, which refers to the reliance on others to refrain from causing emotional harm, such as being receptive to disclosures, maintaining confidentiality of them refraining from criticism, and avoiding acts that elicit embarrassment; and honesty, which refers to telling the truth and engaging in behaviors that are guided by benign rather than malicious intent and by genuine rather than manipulative strategies (Rotenberg, K. J et al 2005). The preceding bases of trust are further differentiated with respect to two domains: cognitive/affective and behavioral. The cognitive/affective domain pertains to individuals' beliefs/attributions concerning the three bases of trust or of trust per se, and the emotional experiences accompanying those beliefs or attributions (Rotenberg, K. J et al 2005).. The behavioral domain pertains to individuals' behavioral tendencies to rely on others to act reliably, in an emotional, trustworthy fashion, and honestly (Rotenberg, K. J et al 2005).. The bases and domains are differentiated by dimensions of the target of trust, comprising specific qualities of trusted–distrusted persons (Rotenberg, K. J et al 2005).. The dimensions of the target of trust are, specificity, which ranges from generalized to a specific person, and familiarity, which ranges from somewhat unfamiliar to very familiar (Rotenberg, K. J et al 2005).

### **Trust and Trustworthiness**

The term *trust* is often used to refer to trustworthiness— a characteristic of the one who is trusted (Kiyonari, Yamagishi, Cook, & Cheshire, 2006). For example, when people speak of a “decline in trust in American society,” they usually mean that Americans are perceived as less trustworthy now than at some time in the past (Kiyonari, Yamagishi, Cook, & Cheshire, 2006).. At the same time, the term *trust* is used as well to refer to trust or trustfulness; sometimes this is viewed as a psychological trait of the truster, not a characteristic or trait of the trustee (Kiyonari, Yamagishi, Cook, & Cheshire, 2006).

### **Trust and Distrust in Organizations**

"The conceptual structure and empirical basis of claims concerning the role of trust and untrustworthiness" (Ashkanasy N., 2005). In *Trust and Distrust in Organizations*, there is little doubt that it represents some of the latest thinking and research on the topic. Distrust, aims to provide an analysis of distrust to get a clear understanding of trust (Ashkanasy N., 2005). Distrust, like trust, is also contextual, so that "A distrusts B with respect to X. In other words, "A might trust B on some matters, but not on others" (Ashkanasy N., 2005) Finally, the chapters make it clear that distrust is not necessarily dysfunctional, nor even unethical. On the contrary, distrust is a necessary component of rational assessment (Ashkanasy N., 2005). To trust is to give discretion to another who is free to betray the faith placed in him or her" (Ashkanasy N., 2005) This definition is much more parsimonious than the convoluted definitions that one so often encounters in this literature, and still makes it clear that trust differs from mere expectation in that it implies conscious choice (Ashkanasy N., 2005).

When taking a look at trust, there are two types of trusters; the low trusters and the high trusters (Ashkanasy N., 2005). If an individual is a low trustor they have the tendency to not trust others until they have clear evidence that they can be trusted (Ashkanasy N., 2005). On the other hand the high trustor is seen as more likely to be fooled (Ashkanasy N., 2005). The high trustor has the degree of willingness to believe stranger in absence of clear data. Gullibility is in conjunction with those individuals who have the ability to trust easier (Ashkanasy N., 2005). It is stated that a gullible person trusts others until they have clear evidence that they cannot be trusted (Ashkanasy N., 2005). Studies show that a gullible person, or a high trustor, is less likely to lie or cheat or steal, more likely to give second chance, and more likely to respect the rights of others (Ashkanasy N., 2005).

### **Measurement of specific interpersonal trust**

Interpersonal trust is a basic feature of all social situations that demand cooperation and interdependence (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). High trustors emerge as independent and trustworthy (Rotter, 1971), honest (Steinke, 1975), and open to seeking psychological help (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). But to relate trust only to positive personal attributes is a disservice to those who, for very good reasons, refuse to trust a specific other person (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). Finally, because such scales predict a willingness to trust across target persons and situations, they do not accurately determine an individual's trust in another under particular circumstances (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). Intimate interpersonal relationships have both a history and a future (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). They are not static laboratory still frames nor can they be explained purely in terms of each individual's personal characteristics, dynamics, or style (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). If John is involved in a relationship with Marsha, whether he trusts her to keep a secret is apt to be based on beliefs



about her personality, her past history of betrayal of confidences, and the current climate of their association (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). To understand trusting relationships, therefore, we need to deal with specific trust: both trust in a specific other person and a specific type of trust (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982).

### **Effects of gender, gender role, and individual trust on self- disclosure**

Self-disclosure, the process of revealing personal information to other people, was examined as effected by gender, gender role, and individualized trust (Foubert, J. D., & Sholley, B. K., 1996). Self-disclosure, the process of revealing personal information to other people, was examined as effected by gender, gender role, and individualized trust (Foubert, J. D., & Sholley, B. K., 1996). Significant interactions emerged between gender and individualized trust, gender, and gender role, and individualized trust and gender role (Foubert, J. D., & Sholley, B. K., 1996). Although masculine males and masculine females self-disclosed similarly, feminine females disclosed markedly more than feminine males (Foubert, J. D., & Sholley, B. K., 1996). The relationship between individualized trust and gender role revealed that an increase in self-disclosure common to androgynous individuals is restricted to those who are high trusting (Foubert, J. D., & Sholley, B. K., 1996).

### **Hypotheses and Operationalized Variables**

The following independent variable that will be measured is gender, male and female. The dependent variable (how individuals view trust) will be measured using the Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna Trust Scale (trust w/in close interpersonal relationships) (1985). The hypothesis states that males seem to have more difficulty in trusting than females.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

One hundred students from a Midwestern university participated in the study; they did not receive any class credit or reward of any kind. Data from 100 participants (two surveys thrown out for incomplete data). Therefore, 98 participants' data are considered in the data analysis. Breakdown of the 98 who reported gender as follows: 48 males and 50 females. Breakdown of the 98 participants who reported their age was as follows: 61.3% age 18-21, 23.5% age 22-26, 10.1% 27-35, and 4.0% 42 and above. Data were collected in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010).

### **Materials**

An 18-item questionnaire was compiled using questions from the Trust Scale (Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna, 1985). Items included statements such as, "I know how my partner is going to act. My partner can always be counted on to act as I expect," "My partner's behavior tends to be quite variable. I can't always be sure what my partner will surprise me with next," and "my partner behaves in a consistent manner." (Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna, 1985). Of the 18 items on the Trust Scale nine were reverse-scored; all items scored so that a higher number indicates a higher level of difficulty in interpersonal trust.

### **Procedure**

Participants were asked to complete the 18-item questionnaire during class time. The researcher explained the general goal of the study and explicitly stated that the object of the study was not to judge anyone on how they answered but to gain better understanding on how





									Lower	Upper
predictability	Equal variances assumed	2.378	.126	-.713	96	.477	-.94833	1.32917	3.58672	1.69005
	Equal variances not assumed			-.717	93.139	.475	-.94833	1.32327	3.57604	1.67938

Table 1.3

Dependability

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
dependability	Equal variances assumed	4.839	.030	1.124	96	.264	-1.65667	1.47390	4.58233	1.26899
	Equal variances not assumed			1.129	93.728	.262	-1.65667	1.46795	4.57142	1.25808

Table 1.4

Faith

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means
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	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
faith Equal variances assumed	.341	.561	1.766	96	.081	-2.54750	1.44233	5.41049	.31549
Equal variances not assumed			1.761	92.833	.082	-2.54750	1.44661	5.42025	.32525

**Discussion**

The original hypothesis stated: Males seem to have more difficulty in trusting than females at a Midwestern institution. Because there was no significant results on the total trusting, it is clear that this data does not support the original hypothesis.

**Limitations**

If this study is repeated in the future, there are a few alterations that would improve the quality of the results. First, there would be a larger sample size, so that there is more variation in the results that are found. Second, race would be included into the demographics of the study. There may be a relationship in why certain individuals feel the way they do about putting their trust into another person, and also having the faith, dependability and predictability of another individual. Along with adding race, the research could be done in a more diverse setting. There could possibly be more questions that could be asked to help bring significance to the results.

**Implications**

In the future, this project can help find reasons as to why trust can come easy for some and be more difficult for others. Since there was nothing that was answered, there are many questions that need to be asked. For instance, “What has caused your views on how one trusts?”, and, “What are the distinguishing factors on getting that individual person to trust another.

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