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**Public Relations and Organizational Credibility: Refining the Definition,
Measurement and Assessment of Organizational Trust**

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Abstract

This manuscript examines recent research findings from the fields of public relations and management which suggest that the study of organizational trust has not yielded a clear conceptual definition or a set of commonly agreed upon factors. Given this foundation the purpose of this paper is to forward a call for a re-examination of the conceptual definition of organizational trust, with a goal of identifying a clear, reliable, and stable multi-dimensional factor structure. Moreover, the cognitive processes of cynicism, mistrust/distrust are also examined at the individual and relational levels and the argument is forwarded that these individual and relational processes are separate from perceptions of global trust. Finally, the methodologies used to assess trust are discussed, with a particular focus on the impact of conceptual disharmony. linear, and presents the implications of such findings Additionally, this paper argues that trust and accompanying processes mistrust/distrust may not be necessarily.

It is difficult today to find an issue of a professional journal or magazine in the areas of public relations, business, and/or management that does not contain at least one article discussing the need for building increased perceptions of organizational credibility and trust among key stakeholders. The problem however for the scholar and the practitioner is that there has been little conceptual agreement on what constitutes organizational credibility and/or trust in the organization (Battacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Bigely, & Pearce, 1998; Connell and Mannion, 2006; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Battacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Young, 2006). Moreover, driven in part by the lack of conceptual clarity is the lack of consistency in the techniques and methods used to assess trust (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Lewicki, Mcallister, & Bies, 1998). These inconsistencies make generalizability and application of knowledge difficult, and may lead to errors in measurement, assessment, and strategic planning efforts based on those data.

A Call for the Renewed Study of Trust

This manuscript forwards a set of arguments that call for the re-examination of the concept of trust from both a conceptual and a methodological perspective. Examination by scholars in the multidisciplinary field of public relations may hold the potential to yield some of the strongest analyses because the focus of public relations is on the relationship between individuals, groups of individuals, and organizations, and often the communication behaviors that bind them. Specifically, by examining current literatures and recent findings across a number of disciplines the argument is forwarded that current definitions of organizational credibility, usually defined as trust are lacking in that they may focus on a global solitary trust factor. Moreover, the argument is presented that trust and mistrust/distrust are differing cognitive processes which are blurred by practitioners and researchers alike whom often assess the concept with simplistic measures that fail to capture the breadth of the concept, and may use item sets that do not provide for a clear picture of underlying factors and processes. This manuscript also calls for a re-examination of the methodologies used to measure, assess, and analyze trust. Specifically, a set of arguments are forwarded and supported which suggest that trust is conceptually different from mistrust/or distrust and that these processes may have non-linear properties. In turn, if there are indeed differing sets of cognitive processes and some of these are non-linear in nature, they are perhaps best modeled using sets of differing probability curves.

Last, the purpose of this manuscript is an attempt to begin the conceptual and methodological renewal of the construct known as organizational trust in the public relations, organizational communication, and management literatures. It does not attempt to forward a final settled definition of the concept, but rather suggests factors and approaches that may be useful and sets the conceptual and empirical groundwork that will be needed to drive theoretical discussion, identify clear lines of research, and provide a methodological foundation to aid scholars and practitioners alike.

Managing Public Relationships

At the core of public relations, organizational communication, and management literatures is the belief that organizations must carefully monitor and manage their relationships with key stakeholders. The focus on the organization- stakeholder relationship has been the center of examination, from Arthur Page's seminal *Principles of Public Relations* to recent models of relational management that have been developed and

tested by key scholars in the field of public relations (See for example Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Grunig 1992; Grunig & Huang 2000). These models have borrowed heavily from the literatures on interpersonal communication, relational communication, organizational communication, and management. Central to these models is the concept of the strong need for relational trust between the organization and the publics to which it is related. Furthermore, both the models forwarded by Broom et al. (1997; 2000) and Grunig (Grunig et al. 1992; Grunig and Huang, 2000) discuss the transactional nature of organizational communication relationships, which by definition require trust to operate effectively.

For example, Grunig and Huang (2000) outline a revised and refined model of organizational public relationships where they discuss and clearly identify trust as an important organizational outcome. In their discussion of this issue they draw from a number of different definitions including those that incorporate elements of vulnerability and risk, reliance, and lack of intent to exploit goodwill. Conceptually, this approach makes sense in that it points to a multi-dimensional model of trust, where factors that impact the perceptions of credibility and trust are built into the model. However, a problem arises in that the authors forward a suggested measure of the trust outcome that consists of three items, one which focuses on general distrust, one that focuses on the truthfulness of the organization, and one that focuses on fair and just treatment. This is a common limited assessment approach and one which leads to problems in terms of reliability and validity, and less than accurate prediction when used to in programmatic planning. The core of the problem for most public relations and management scholars alike is that trust is a multiple faceted concept, that can take on many meanings depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. The end result is that there are a multitude of studies which all study this concept, but make different predictions about the structure and predictors of trust.

What is Trust?

A recent examination of the literatures that surround the concepts of organizational credibility and trust can only come to one conclusion. There is really little agreement of what constitutes a definitive set of factors that carefully capture the trust concept (Battacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Connell & Manion, 2006; Grunig & Huang, 2000. Lewis, 2001; Mayer, Davis, Schoorman, 1995; Mayer & Davis 1999; Young 2006). Theorists offer a wide range of factors that may set the groundwork for antecedents (such as risk and vulnerability), impact perceptions (such as reliability, confidence, integrity), influence outcomes (ability, benevolence), and provide structure for the relationship. Moreover, there has been some debate to the extent to which environmental and personality factors should be built into predictive models in that they can greatly impact perceptions of trust within the confines of the relationship. (Battacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998). The common thread through many of these works is the need for increased clarity in the conceptualization and in the measurement of trust.

Integrative Models

In an article which attempts to build a broader and integrative model of organizational trust Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) examine a number of literatures from across business disciplines and sociology and examine both single factor conceptualizations, as well as a number of multiple factorial conceptualizations of trust.

A key perspective is that they are focused on identifying the underlying dimensions of the perception of trust as opposed to identifying antecedents for the possibility of trust to exist. After their analysis of previous literature, they forward three factors that appear to underlie the “trust factor” in regard to organizations: Ability, Benevolence, and Integrity. Ability is related to outcomes in transactional relationships and may incorporate concepts such as reliability and confidence. Benevolence incorporates aspects of the intentions of the organization in meeting stakeholder needs, and a perception that the goodwill of the stakeholder will not be abused. And an integrity factor encompassing concepts such as accuracy and honesty. In subsequent research Mayer and Davis, (1999), find support for the three factor solution, but note that the relationship between trust and underlying factors suggests that the factor and the cognitive processes that underlie it may be more complex than previously thought. They note that “The relatively high correlations between trust and the factors of trustworthiness may give rise to concerns over whether the measure of trust is distinct from the measures of trustworthiness. There is a clear conceptual distinction between trust as a behavioral intention (i.e., willingness to be vulnerable) and perceptions of the trustee (i.e., the factors of trustworthiness).” This finding alone suggests the need for more research to refine this construct both conceptually and methodologically.

Goodwill and Benevolence

While the three factor conceptual solution of trust (ability, benevolence, integrity) may not seem to be congruent with some of the conceptualizations in the larger field of communications, (focusing usually on a three factor solution of credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, and dynamism; cite) and conceptualize trust as a uni-dimensional construct focused on honest), there is some empirical evidence that originally it was a part of the equation. Giffin (1967) examines the literature underling the study of source credibility and the role it had played in the formation of theories of trust in the communication process. Giffin identified a number of studies that had provided support for an additional underlying factor of credibility/trust. Giffin cites numerous research findings that identified the role of perceived communicator intent and/or the role of potential gain on perceptions of credibility and trust. Furthermore, Andersen (1961) also identified an evaluative dimension that had incorporated earlier works by Tannenbaum (1953), Berlo and Kumata (1956), and Bettinghaus (1959) which had incorporated and tested models that included intelligence, character, and goodwill.

McCroskey and Young (1981) re-examined the goodwill/benevolence dimension and found that it did indeed underlie perceptions of trustworthiness, and note that the methodologies used to factor analyze results, and the use of “semantic differential” types of scales may have skewed findings and provided results that were misleading.

More recently, McCroskey and Teven (1999) build on the previous claims made by Giffin and McCroskey and Young by demonstrating that the elimination of the underlying goodwill factor from empirical models occurred because of methodological errors as opposed to conceptual clarity. They stated that goodwill holds a central place within the context of traditional theory of ethos/source credibility. Furthermore, McCroskey and Teven argue that the “goodwill, perceived caring, and intent-toward-receiver constructs are, for all intents and purposes, isomorphic constructs” (p. 101). In their study, McCroskey and Teven (1999) found goodwill/caring to be highly associated with other measures of the ethos/source credibility construct, namely trustworthiness and

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competence. Goodwill, or perceived caring, is seen as a means of opening communication channels more widely (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Moreover, an examination of McCroskey and Teven finds that while the results do find support for the goodwill factor, they use the traditional believability focus in their measures of trust, and it could be argued that even larger effect sizes would have been found if they had incorporated the concepts of communicator intent and/or perceived benevolence.

Messages are interpreted and evaluated through the filter of the receiver's perceptions of the message's source. No message is received independently from its source or presumed source (McCroskey, 2005). Constituents would certainly be more likely to listen more attentively to an organization who they believe has their best interests at heart than to one who they think have ulterior motives.

Goodwill, or perceived caring, is seen as a means of opening communication channels more widely (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Public relations is the means for an organization to reach an intended audience with positive intent. Goodwill helps to create audience understanding. Public relations is about goodwill and mutual understanding, which are clear underlying factors of trust.

Goodwill, or perceived caring, is also related to responsiveness (Teven, 2001). Responsiveness would no doubt be important to the way organizations are perceived by consumers. A responsive organization recognizes and reacts to current issues or controversies, while the non-responsive organization's messages are not adapted to the consumers. Consumers who perceive an organization regularly responding to them may also see the organization as caring more about them.

Further complicating attempts at definitional clarity of the organizational trust concept especially in the more closely aligned field of reputation management are definitions that may incorporate trust related perceptions such as benevolence and goodwill into concepts such as social responsibility. In a recent work attempting to clarify some of the conceptual and measurement issues surrounding reputation management, Lewis (2001) includes factors such as quality of products, service, treatment of staff, quality of management, as well as environmental and social responsibility, which involves contributions to the community and making a difference in the lives of stakeholders.

Expanding the Definition and Assessment of the Trust Model

Some scholars in the business and management literature (Battacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998) develop a model of trust based on outcomes, using both business literatures, social sciences, and probability theory. Similar to previous approaches their model incorporates factors such as reliance, vulnerability/risk, and conjectures about outcomes. However, more important is their identification that when assessing and predicting trust, factors outside of the current transactional relationship need to be taken into account, such as the environmental and psychological factors that may impact perceptions and in turn impact the probability curves.

Moreover Mayer and Davis (1999) note that the relationship between trust and the factors that underlie trustworthiness is unclear. "The relatively high correlations between trust and the factors of trustworthiness may give rise to concerns over whether the measure of trust is distinct from the measures of trustworthiness. There is a clear conceptual distinction between trust as a behavioral intention (i.e., willingness to be vulnerable) and perceptions of the trustee (i.e., the factors of trustworthiness)."

The Cognitive Processes of Mistrust and Distrust

The literature is clear on the fact that organizational trust is a multifaceted construct (Battacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Connell & Mannion, 2006; Mayer, Davis, Schoorman, 1995; Young, 2006), that trust and mistrust/distrust are separate constructs (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Lewicki, Mcallister, & Bies, 1998) and that these processes that impact perceptions of the organization can occur at different levels of analysis, case in point as an individual predisposition (Battacharya, Devinney, Pillutla, 1998). Furthermore, it is also clear that these related cognitive processes need to be incorporated into models as separate constructs and assessed via different measures as opposed to polar opposites (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Lewicki, Mcallister, & Bies, 1998). In order to better analyze the processes that are involved in mistrust/distrust they will be examined from a number of abstractional perspectives that range from an individual difference perspective, to transactional relational perspectives, and finally some indicators that there may cultural/social levels of mistrust and/or distrust.

At the individual level, several components in the credibility dynamic are at play. Cynicism is an individual difference variable which may be a strong predictor of perceptions of trust or mistrust. Cynicism has been defined as “a negative attitude that can be both broad and specific in focus, and has cognitive, affective, and behavioral components” (Stanley, Mayer, & Topalnytsky, 2005, p. 430). Arguing from a contract violation perspective, Andersson (1996) noted that cynical employees tend to be characterized as more frustrated and experience more hopelessness and disillusionment and “contempt toward and distrust of a person, group, ideology, social convention, or institution” (p. 1398). Complicating the issue, Stanley, Mayer, and Topalnytsky, (2005) note that cynicism may be a *sufficient* but not *necessary* condition for mistrust. In other words, perceptions of an organization’s competence can create enough mistrust regardless if there is no doubt about the veracity of an organization’s motives. The impact of personality also plays a role in the interpretation of messages and, in particular, the deception process.

Mistrust/Distrust at the Relational Level

While public relations and management literatures will at times focus on individual predispositions that impact perceptions of the organization, they often approach phenomena from a transactional or relational of analysis. An analysis of the literature on relationships (both dyadic and organizationally) yields some explanations regarding the possible predispositions of individuals to mistrust those with whom they have a relationship with thus have an increased potential to distrust the messages sent from that individual. When exploring such biases in processing that perhaps would be demonstrated by those attempting to detect deceit, Levine and his colleagues (1999) posed the hypothesis that they would find a *veracity effect*, predicting accuracy in judging truthful statements would be significantly greater than accuracy in judging deceptive statements. In fact, they expected accuracy in judging truths to be greater than chance, and accuracy in judging lies to be less than chance. This would be caused by a *truth bias*: people’s tendency to judge statements as truthful would be greater than their tendency to judge statements as deceptive. In a series of three experiments, Levine et al. 1999 re-analyzed Levine and McCornack’s (2000) and McCornack and Levine’s 1990 data, finding support for their hypotheses. Furthermore, they found that, in those experiments, the effect of the independent variables (suspicion, probing, and heuristic versus

systematic processing of information) was not the same on accuracy at detecting truthful statements as on accuracy at detecting deceptive statements.

Several factors may cause the veracity effect. It may be the result of heuristic processing (Stiff, Kim, & Ramesh, 1992), or the result of the very functioning of the human mind, which in principle represents as true all the incoming information it comprehends (Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990). Or it may be a consequence of the adaptive strategy of believing the incoming messages, since in everyday life most of those messages are truthful (Anderson, Ansfield, & DePaulo, 1999). While individuals will differ in terms of information processing, heuristic judgments of credibility seem to be judgments of truthfulness (Gilbert et al., 1990; Millar & Millar, 1997; Stiff et al., 1992). However, the findings of Levine and McCornack (1999) suggest that if there is the individual perceives some reason to distrust incoming messages, the biases can reverse as mistrust begins to build. As an increased amount of information is conveyed by the sender, that information becomes the basis for the receiver's credibility namely, trust or mistrust judgments. In other words, the transactional nature of the organizational communication process can serve as either a trigger or an inhibitor of the cognitive processes underlying mistrust and/or distrust. An example of such processes is discussed by Stanley, Mayer, and Topalnytsky (2005) who examine employee cynicism and resistance to organizational change.

Additionally, in a recent analysis of the literature on organizational trust. Young (2006) clearly identifies this phenomenon in the organizational relationship process, when she states that: *“Trust can evolve from being an amalgam of simple, exploratory emotions enabling the decisions to take low level risks to something including emotions of the relationship sustaining and enjoying types. Alternatively, early disappointments may lead to decrease in relationship building emotions of trust and movement to a cycle of indifference or distrust.”* What is clear is that mistrust/distrust are cognitive processes that are separate from a global perception of trust, and that once these processes are in play, they must be accurately assessed and subsequently factored in any model of organizational trust, especially those that seek to benchmark the relationships between a specific organization and its stakeholder with the intent of instituting strategic programs to improve the perceptions associated with those relationships.

Finally, while processes of trust and mistrust have been documented to vary at the individual level, and relational levels, there is also some evidence that they can also vary at a social or cultural level. For example, the literatures in the fields of psychology and counseling have identified a level of cultural mistrust among African-Americans and their perceptions to seek help from white counselors and predominantly white assistance programs (Nickerson, Helms, and Terrell, 1994; Whaley, 2001). Additionally, at a social level some scholars (See Reese & Semetko, 2002) have suggested that such cynicism may impact levels of citizen engagement and participation.

Overall, given that conceptually the cognitive processes underlying trust and mistrust/distrust are clearly different, and may occur at differing levels of abstraction it is no longer useful to conceptualize and to assess these processes as bi-polar opposites or with one global uni-dimensional trust oriented measure. Moreover, the sum of these findings suggests that both global perceptions and the factors that potentially drive individuals to mistrust and/or distrust the organization need to be carefully measured and tracked.

The Methodology of Trust

From a conceptual standpoint a series of arguments have been made that the conceptualization of credibility/trust from an organizational perspective needs to incorporate a multi-faceted multi-dimensional approach that includes factors such as ability (reliability, confidence, outcomes), benevolence (lack of malice and goodwill), and integrity (honesty, accuracy). Moreover, the argument has also been made and supported that in order to more accurately gauge perceptions of organizational trust and the behaviors that accompany such trust; collateral processes such as mistrust and distrust also need to be identified and assessed. Given this rationale, the methodological issues surrounding the assessment of trust will now be discussed.

The second purpose of this paper was to call for the re-examination of the concept of trust from a methodological perspective. The methodological complexities that underlie the concept of trust is of great importance for both the public relations and organizational scholar, as well as the practitioner who may be engaged in programmatic baseline research that seeks to track and subsequently improve organizational image. The conceptual arguments and foundations above suggest a set of clear implications for the methodologies and analyses that are to be used when attempting to assess and benchmark organizational trust.

There are two clear sets of implications for the measurement and assessment of trust. First, the literature clearly suggests that there are a number of factors that may underlie this concept, and moreover the findings also suggest that the predictive utility of the factors may vary across the unique relationships between the organizations and their stakeholders. This means that in order to assess trust in a valid and reliable manner, scholars and practitioners must clearly understand the relationships between the organization and the public which are the focus of study, and must incorporate sets of measures that capture the full range of underlying factors. Failure to do so will result in less than optimal measurement models, which will yield questionable results due to varying amounts of specific measurement error (as opposed to random sampling error). More importantly, the success of any programmatic and/or strategic planning that is based on these results will be difficult to assess because of the large degree of variance that will remain unaccounted for by the measurement models.

Additionally, the literature is also clear about the existence and potential roles of mistrust and distrust in the assessment and measure of trust. These processes and any predictor variables which impact them must also be clearly identified and added into the measurement models. Failure to do so will again result in less than optimal measurement, limited utility of baseline/benchmark data, and a limited ability to assess the overall effectiveness of programmatic planning that was based on such measurements.

The second methodological issue is that the cognitive processes related to trust and mistrust/distrust may not be linear. In measurement the goal is to produce a measure that accurately and reliably represents some underlying phenomena or process. In the case of trust from an organizational perspective the goal is to assess the underlying level of trust an individual or group of individuals perceives at any given point in time. These measures are usually constructed using Likert type or "semantic differential" types of scales, which ask individuals to report results on ratings scales that usually vary between 1 through 5, 1 through 7, or 1 through 6. The problem stems from the underlying

assumption that accompanies the results. The assumption when examining the data and making comparisons using such scales is that the data are at least interval level data which means that the distances between each point on the scale are equal. In other words that the distance on the trust scale from a “1” (low) to a “2” is equal to the distance between a “4” and a “5”. While technically this distance appears to be the same, cognitively it may not be. Rather based on the research identifying the processes underlying mistrust and distrust, it appears to be the case that cognitively the distance from a “1” to a “2” is much larger than between “4” and “5”. In other words those who report lower levels of trust, and may be mistrustful of the organization may be harder to move in a positive direction than those who report higher levels of trust and/or are not cognitively engaged in the mistrust/distrust processes.

To complicate matters based on the literatures that were examined in this manuscript it appears that the cognitive processes surrounding mistrust (For an example see Levine and McCornack’s work on the veracity bias) may lead to the use of selective attention, perception, and retention when processing information in the face of messages that are deemed to be from a source that is not trusted. Because of these and other defensive mechanisms it may be the case that for some individuals once they reach a certain state of mistrust and/or a lack of trust it may be nearly impossible to get them to move from such a state.

While attempting to avoid unnecessary complexity, the scenario described above is perhaps best modeled by looking at the options on a scale as a series of probability states with the poles being low/high. Once set of theoretical processes used to describe and map such processes are known as Markov processes. Of particular interest is the representation of certain probability states as absorbing end states. In other words, it may be the case for certain individuals that once they reach either a state of total mistrust and or total trust that the probability of them leaving such a state becomes nearly impossible or statistically equal to 0.

In summary, the claim that trust may be non-linear is founded on the notion that it is much more difficult to move those who report lower levels of trust (and perhaps higher levels of mistrust) from one point to another than to move with higher ratings to the next highest rating.

Future Directions

This manuscript has laid the foundation for a conceptual discussion to re-examine the processes surrounding organizational trust, mistrust and/or distrust. Moreover, sets of currently examined factors have been forwarded, and while none have been suggested to provide a definitive set of underlying factors, it is clear that the most recent literature suggests that the optimal solution is not uni-dimensional and moreover may have to incorporate the cognitive processes of mistrust and distrust. Second, from a methodological perspective, this manuscript is currently serving as the conceptual basis for a series of studies that will examine the factors that underlie trust, and will also explore the hypothesis that trust may be non-linear. In other words it may be the case that participants in research studies who are either provided a scenario where they do not trust an organization, or provide their own example of one that they perceive themselves to have low levels of trust in may report greater distances between units on interval level scales. Moreover, they may also report that it will take higher quantities of communication, and higher levels of action to move them from one position on the scale

to one that is higher. These predictions would be consistent with a hypothesis which suggests that trust is non-linear. Moreover, through experimental manipulation, and/or induction the question of trust and “immobility” is also to be explored. In other words, if an individual reports very low levels of trust, and actively mistrusts and/or distrusts an organization it may be the case that no amount of communication and/or accompanying behaviors may be able to move that individual to a higher state of trust, especially if cognitive processes related to distrust are activated and are manifested by the use of selective attention, perception, and retention.

Conclusion

Overall, this manuscript has examined the recent results of investigations examining the concepts of organizational credibility and trust. The consistent finding was that there is little agreement on what constitutes organizational trust, and that disagreement is due to the varying perspectives and approaches taken to the study of trust, as well as to the difficulty of applying one overall model to all organizational relationships. This paper explored some of the suggested factor structures and called for a more careful examination of this construct, especially from a multidimensional perspective. The roles of mistrust and distrust were also examined and the argument was forwarded that these processes are separate from global perceptions of trust and that they must be identified and accurately assessed when managing organizational relationships. Finally, arguments were forwarded regarding the implications of the multidimensionality on the measurement of trust, as well as the argument that perceptions of trust, and the related processes of distrust and mistrust may be non-linear in nature.

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