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The effects of visuo-spatial perspective-taking on trust

Thorsten M. Erle^{a,*}, Janna K. Ruessmann^b, Sascha Topolinski^a^a University of Cologne, Germany^b University of Würzburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Trust is a universally admired quality of interpersonal relations, be their nature private, professional, economic, or political. However, little is known about how trust can be fostered. One cognitive process that has been suggested as a precursor of trust is perspective-taking, but experimental evidence for a causal relation between the two constructs is missing. In the present article, we investigated whether perspective-taking increases trust in strangers and known interaction partners. Perspective-taking should lead to trust, because it has been shown to increase liking of other people, which itself is an important antecedent of trust. In three high-powered experiments (total $N = 612$), we investigated the effects of perspective-taking on trust using a novel visuo-spatial manipulation of perspective-taking. In Experiment 1, participants reported feeling more trust for a stranger after engaging in visuo-spatial perspective-taking compared to trials where they remained in their egocentric perspective. Experiment 2 supported the above-mentioned theoretical mechanism that trust in a stranger is increased due to liking and generalized the results from self-reported trust to behavioral trust within a trust game. Experiment 3 demonstrated an important boundary condition of this effect by showing that when the trustworthiness of another person is concurrently directly manipulated by giving participants information about how the other person has behaved in the past, the effects of perspective-taking on behavioral trust vanish, and while its effects on self-reported liking and trust remain intact, they are small in comparison to the effects of direct trustworthiness manipulations on self-reported liking and trust.

1. Introduction

Trust is one of the most sought-after qualities in human relationships and proverbially “to be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved” (MacDonald, 1877). In both psychology and economics trust is commonly defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectations that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or to control that other party” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). Thus, trust involves taking risks to achieve social, economic, or political success and cooperation. The number of historical examples of trust leading to such successes is countless. Given this, more research on factors contributing to a trusting relation is needed (for a review of previous research, see Kramer, 1999).

The most important predictor of trust is past behavior: reciprocating in a cooperative manner, for instance in economic exchanges, predicts higher trust on both behavioral and brain measures (King-Casas et al., 2005). Limiting the scope of such objective predictors of trust is the fact that they crucially hinge on prior information about others. For instance, reciprocity requires knowledge about the (past) behavior of

another person. But once such information is present, these objective trust cues most strongly predict trust.

However, in many situations there is no prior information on which one could base feelings of trust (e.g., first-time interactions with strangers). Concerning these situations, different streams of research have investigated incidental cues that predict spontaneous feelings of trust. These cues have in common that unlike reciprocity they normatively are not related to trustworthiness. This research has identified cues like attractiveness (Wilson & Eckel, 2006), similarity (DeBruine, 2002; Plötner, Over, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2015), processing fluency (Silva & Topolinski, 2016; Zürn & Topolinski, 2017), facial expressions (Krumhuber et al., 2007; Scharlemann, Eckel, Kacelnik, & Wilson, 2001; for reviews, see Todorov, 2008; Todorov, Olivola, Dotsch, & Mende-Siedlecki, 2015) and the time one is exposed to them (Todorov, Pakrashi, & Oosterhof, 2008; Todorov & Uleman, 2003; Willis & Todorov, 2006), or likability (Hawes, Mast, & Swan, 1989; Nicholson, Compeau, & Sethi, 2001; Swan, Trawick, & Silva, 1985; for reviews, see Doney & Cannon, 1997; Rotter, 1980) as incidental predictors of trust. While these cues could affect feelings of trust in interactions with known others as well, it is likely that their heuristic influence is much

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Cologne, Richard-Strauss-Straße 2, 50931 Köln, Germany.
E-mail address: thorsten.erle@uni-koeln.de (T.M. Erle).

smaller than the impact of objective trust cues or might even be completely limited to first-time interactions, a hypothesis that we later test (see Experiment 3).

A candidate antecedent of spontaneous trust that has only received little attention is perspective-taking, which is “the ability to intuit another person's thoughts, feeling, and inner mental states” (Epley & Caruso, 2009, p. 297; for a recent review, see Ku, Wang, & Galinsky, 2015). Perspective-taking facilitates social coordination (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008), leads to sympathy or liking of another person (Batson et al., 1997b; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997a), higher perceived similarity (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996; Davis et al., 2004), reduces expressions of prejudice (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Myers, Laurent, & Hodges, 2014; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011; Todd, Galinsky, & Bodenhausen, 2012), motivates prosocial behavior (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002), and leads to the assimilation of one's thoughts to those of another person (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Erle & Topolinski, 2017; Galinsky et al., 2008).

There is indeed prior correlational evidence that perspective-taking is linked with spontaneous trust, as measured with interpersonal attitudes and behaviors in economic games (Fett et al., 2014; van den Bos, Westenberg, van Dijk, & Crone, 2010), but causal evidence from experimental manipulations is missing (for a rare exception which manipulated perspective-taking within a vignette that was judged by the participants from a third-person perspective, see Berndsen, Wenzel, Thomas, & Noske, 2018). In the present paper we employed experimental inductions of perspective-taking to gauge their impact of trust. Moreover, we used a novel paradigm that induces perspective-taking not by explicit instructions to emotionally and socially empathize with the target, but by basic visuo-spatial means. Usually, experiments on perspective-taking rely on direct instructions to empathize (for an overview over these instructions, see Davis et al., 2004; see also Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). That is, participants are asked to either remain objective while reading information about a social target or (the control condition), to imagine that the events of the story would happen to them (the “imagine-self perspective”), or to strongly consider how the events would feel for the protagonist of the story (the “imagine-other perspective”). It is obvious that these instructions trigger “perspective-taking” in a metaphorical sense: the participant shall empathize, think and feel with the social target.

In contrast, we used a paradigm that triggered perspective-taking in a literal sense, by engaging participants in a task that required them to adopt the visuo-spatial perspective of a given social target (independent from its thoughts or feelings). This task was developed in basic cognitive research exploring visual perspective-taking (e.g., Kessler & Thomson, 2010) and follows a very simple yet effective logic: the participant sees a target sitting on the opposite side of a table. Two different objects are placed to the right and the left of the target, and the participant is asked to indicate the location of an object either from her own perspective (egocentric) or from the perspective of the target (other-centered). Cognitive research has shown that in order to master the other-centered perspective, participants do not simply recode the sides (“What is left to me is right to the participant”) but rather mentally rotate into the target and adopt its visuo-spatial perspective (Kessler & Thomson, 2010). This is evidenced by longer response times for other-centered than egocentric trials, which will also serve as a manipulation check in the present experiments.

Note that this visuo-spatial induction of perspective-taking only instigates the very specific process of perspective-taking and does not at all involve any other affective or cognitive process related to empathy. Still, it has been shown recently that it triggers social effects, such as a higher liking and higher susceptibility for anchors provided by the target (Erle & Topolinski, 2017), and that the mastery of this task is correlated with general empathic perspective-taking abilities (Erle & Topolinski, 2015). In the present experiments we wanted to test whether this merely visuo-spatial manipulation of perspective-taking would

affect spontaneous trust. Compared to perspective-taking instructions, this manipulation has several advantages. First, it is an indirect induction, working only by the task constraints, ruling out experimental demand as an alternative explanation (as is discussed for usual perspective-taking instructions, e.g., Neuberger et al., 1997). Second, while the use of instructions allows only one condition (either perspective-taking or no perspective-taking) to be realized in a given participant (i.e., between-subjects manipulations), visuo-spatial perspective-taking can be manipulated from trial to trial in a within-subjects manner. Third, it makes it possible to manipulate perspective-taking for completely unknown others, something that is not possible with instructions that necessarily provide information about the target of the perspective-taking process. This is especially important for investigating the effect of perspective-taking on spontaneous trust in first-time interactions with strangers.

The present experiments employed this novel visuo-spatial induction of perspective-taking. Based on the earlier evidence that social perspective-taking correlates with initial trust (Fett et al., 2014; van den Bos et al., 2010), we predicted that visuo-spatial perspective taking increases initial trust for an unknown person (Experiment 1). Going beyond those earlier findings, we employed an experimental rather than a correlational design. Moreover, we predicted that this impact of visuo-spatial perspective taking on trust would be mediated by liking, since perspective-taking has been shown to induce liking (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997a; Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997b; Erle & Topolinski, 2017), and liking is in turn a strong antecedent of trust (e.g., Hawes et al., 1989; Nicholson et al., 2001; Swan et al., 1985; for reviews, see Doney & Cannon, 1997; Rotter, 1980). We tested this in Experiment 2, also using a behavioral measure of trust (investments in an economic game). Finally, Experiment 3 benchmarked whether visuo-spatial perspective taking still affects trust in the face of objective trust-related information (past behavior of the target) to explore potential boundary conditions.

2. Power analysis and data preparation

The sample size to achieve a power of $(1-\beta) = .80$ in a two-tailed paired-samples *t*-test ($N = 199$) was computed using the effect size of Experiment 4 in Erle and Topolinski (2017; $d_z = 0.20$) in *g*Power* (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Although the observed effect size was substantially larger in Experiment 1 ($d_z = 0.36$), the same sample size was used in Experiments 2–3 because they were more complex. The experiments were sensitive to detect effect sizes of $d_z = 0.19$ (Experiment 1), $d_z = 0.20$ (Experiment 2), and $d_z = 0.20$ (Experiment 3), respectively. Trials with errors or Reaction times (RT) > 10,000 ms on the visual perspective-taking task were excluded from all analyses (cf. Erle & Topolinski, 2017). Participants for whom these criteria depleted any cell of the design were list-wise deleted from the respective analyses. No exclusion criteria were applied. All manipulations and measures are reported. All data and materials are available at <https://osf.io/2ckz9>.

3. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 aimed to test whether visuo-spatial perspective-taking enhances spontaneous feelings of trust in a first-time interaction with a stranger. It was expected that in the absence of other trust-signals, perspective-taking increases spontaneous trust.

3.1. Methods

Participants completed 16 trials of a visuo-spatial perspective-taking task, during which they saw an avatar sitting at a table with two objects in front of him (in this case a pistol and a flower; adapted from Kessler & Thomson, 2010). Their task during every trial was to virtually “grab” one of these objects by pressing a corresponding response key. To

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