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A gene-dependent climatoeconomic model of generalized trust

Dejun Tony Kong

Bauer College of Business, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204, USA

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ABSTRACT

Given the benefits of generalized trust, its determinants receive growing attention in international/cross-cultural management/psychology. This research proposed a gene-dependent climatoeconomic model, integrating multiple types of determinants parsimoniously. Across 53 societies, generalized trust is a multiplicative function not only of climatic demands and wealth (climatoeconomic contextualization), but also of climatic demands, wealth, and the 5-HTTLPR S-allele prevalence (gene-dependent climatoeconomic contextualization), mediated by uncertainty avoidance. The climatoeconomic contextualization is present only in societies possessing a low level of the 5-HTTLPR S-allele prevalence. These findings shed light on trust and international management research as well as interventions and policy making for societal effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

The effectiveness of a group, an organization, a community, or a society requires its members' coordinated actions. Yet people's interests and goals oftentimes are misaligned, causing social conflict (Deutsch, 1949). In order to coordinate their actions with others, individuals use certain heuristics known as organizing principles, such as market, hierarchy, and clan (Ouchi, 1980), to process information and enact appropriate behaviors. Trust, as another important organizing principle (McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003), refers to one's willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding others' intentions or behaviors (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). It economizes on one's cognitive resources (Uzzi, 1997), structures one's mental representations of the environment, and mobilizes one's cooperation with others (McEvily et al., 2003).

Trust has been conceptualized as a form of social capital (Putnam, 1993) that can be utilized and transformed into other forms of capital such as economic (Granovetter, 2005) and intellectual capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), and has received growing attention in various disciplines.¹ Trust can be classified

into particularized (thick or specific) trust and generalized (thin or diffuse) trust; the former refers to one's trust in specific people based on one's familiarity and similarity with those people, whereas the latter refers to trust in most strangers based on their morality, reputation, and characteristics (Freitag & Traunmüller, 2009; Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Kong, 2013a). Although particularized trust can facilitate cooperative behaviors and task performance and reduce deviant behaviors within specific relationships (see Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Kong, Dirks, & Ferrin, 2014 for meta-analytic results), "[i]n modern society, which involves daily interaction with strangers, general[ized] trust is thought to be more important than particular[ized] trust" (Delhey, Newton, & Welzel, 2011, p. 786). Realo, Allik, and Greenfield (2008) also noted that "[d]evelopment and modernization require that the network of trust is extended to others outside of the traditional circle of family, neighborhood, and village" (p. 450). Yet management research has largely focused on particularized trust, neglecting generalized trust. The current research focuses on generalized trust, thus advancing this line of inquiry.

Generalized trust bestows a range of benefits at the macro level; it contributes to better quality of government, economic growth, enhanced subjective well-being, social cohesion, civic engagement, and so forth (see Dinesen, 2012; Kong, 2013a). At the micro level, generalized trust, also known as trust propensity or "the general willingness to trust others" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 715), fosters fairness perception (Bianchi & Brockner, 2012), relationship-specific trust (Colquitt et al., 2007; Mayer & Davis, 1999), trust in outgroup members (Muethel & Bond, 2013), high-quality social relationships (Bernerth & Walker, 2009), and positive work

E-mail address: dkong@bauer.uh.edu.

¹ Trust has been examined as a major topic in economics (e.g., Berg et al., 1995; Croson & Buchan, 1999; Johnson & Mislin, 2011), human biology (e.g., Kosfeld et al., 2005; Riedl & Javor, 2012; Zak et al., 2005), organizational behavior (e.g., Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; McAllister, 1995), political science (Bjørnskov, 2006; Miller & Whitford, 2002), psychology (e.g., Acar-Burkay et al., 2014; Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Kramer, 1999; Rotter, 1971), and sociology (e.g., Delhey & Newton, 2005; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Molm et al., 2000; Yamagishi et al., 1998).

attitudes and behaviors (Bianchi & Brockner, 2012; Colquitt, LePine, Zapata, & Wild, 2011). These benefits generate increasing scholarly interest in identifying the determinants of generalized trust, particularly across cultures (Ferrin & Gillespie, 2010).

Just like any other dispositional factor, there exists a debate on the relative importance of genetic versus environment influences on generalized trust.² Some researchers view that generalized trust can be meaningfully predicted by genetic factors. For instance, Oskarsson, Dawes, Johannesson, and Magnusson (2012) found that extraversion, personal control, and intelligence shared approximately 1/3 of the genetic influence on generalized trust both for males and females. Carl (2014) also found that intelligence had a strong correlation with generalized trust in 15 Spanish regions, 20 Italian regions, 50 U.S. states, and 107 countries, showing a significant genetic influence on generalized trust. Other researchers focus on the importance of the environmental predictors of generalized trust. For example, Bjørnskov (2006) and Kong (2013a), taken together, found that environmental factors such as wealth, political regimes, ethnic diversity, and even thermal climates could determine generalized trust (see Nannestad, 2008 for detailed discussion). However, following the view of gene–environment interaction (i.e., genes can alter people's reactions to specific environmental features and influence their sociopsychological functioning; see Han et al., 2013; Manuck & McCaffery, 2014), Hatemi and McDermott (2012) noted that “there is a recent shift in perspective by both life and social scientists that emphasizes the interplay between genes and the environment...which was proven more accurate than any position favoring either nature or nurture” (p. 525).

Following Hatemi and McDermott's (2012) view as well as the recent trend that population-genetic³ factors have received growing research attention (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011; Minkov, Blagoev, & Bond, 2015), I seek to extend Kong's (2013a) climatoeconomic model and propose a gene-dependent climatoeconomic model by adopting the framework of gene–environment interaction. Following Kim and Sasaki's (2014) model, I conceptualize the serotonin transporter gene polymorphism (5-HTTLPR) S-allele prevalence as a population-genetic predictor moderating the relationship between the climatoeconomic environment (as a multiplicative function of climatic demands and wealth) and generalized trust. In addition, following Kong (2013a), I argue that uncertainty avoidance mediates the interaction relationship of the 5-HTTLPR S-allele prevalence and climatoeconomic environment to generalized trust. While examining the mediating role of uncertainty avoidance, I rule out the alternative mediating mechanisms including the three cultural dimensions examined by Kong (2013a)—individualism–collectivism, power distance, and masculinity–femininity—as well as the two more recently proposed cultural dimensions—long-term orientation and indulgence. Long-term orientation refers to cultural orientation toward the future and long-term fulfillment rather than the present and immediate gratification, whereas indulgence refers to free versus restrained gratification of basic and natural human drives pertaining to enjoyment and fun (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

In so doing, the present research contributes to the literatures on trust and international/cross-cultural management/psychology. First, the present research provides a novel, comprehensive, and yet parsimonious view on the determinants of generalized

trust. This view integrates environmental (economic and thermal-climatic), sociocultural, and population-genetic predictors and considers the interplay between environmental and population-genetic predictors in explaining the evolution of generalized trust. Yet it does not engender an overly complex model. Second, international/cross-cultural management/psychology research has predominantly focused on the relationship between individualism–collectivism or power distance and trust (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010) and neglected other cultural dimensions (e.g., uncertainty avoidance) pertaining to trust (Kong, 2013a). The present research, along with Kong (2013a), bridges this gap and sheds novel light on the linkage between cultural dimensions and trust.

2. Kong's (2013a) climatoeconomic model of generalized trust

Climates create cultures (Van de Vliert, 2007). Van de Vliert (2009) proposed climatic demands–resources theory, claiming that both sociocultural values and sociopsychological functioning can be predicted by the interaction of climatic demands and wealth. Climatic demands serve as a stressor to societal effectiveness. According to coping theory, the first step for coping with stress is stressor appraisals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stressors can be appraised as threats or challenges (e.g., Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993; Tomaka, Blascovich, Kibler, & Ernst, 1997), depending on people's evaluations of the stressors' significance to them and their own coping options; threat appraisals are associated with appraisals that existing resources do not meet environmental demands, thus triggering fear/anxiety and avoidance responses, whereas challenge appraisals are associated with appraisals that existing resources meet or exceed environmental demands, thus triggering excitement/eagerness and approach responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

If climatic demands are not matched by wealth, they can pose threats to human survival and societal effectiveness (Van de Vliert, 2007, 2009, 2013). In response to the uncontrollable and threatening situation, people experience fear/anxiety (Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia, 2008; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and avoid uncertainty and potential losses (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989). However, if climatic demands are matched by wealth, they can pose challenges to a society (Van de Vliert, 2007, 2009, 2013). In response to the controllable and challenging situation, people experience excitement/eagerness (Fugate et al., 2008; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), direct their attention to the promotion of potential gains and opportunities (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), and take effort and risk (Ohly & Fritz, 2010).

Following Van de Vliert's theory, Kong (2013a) proposed a climatoeconomic model of generalized trust, which was replicated by Robbins (2015). As noted earlier, trust is an organizing principle that structures people's mental representations of their environment and coordinates collective actions (McEvily et al., 2003). Trust is associated with people's orientation toward rewards and senses of certainty and predictability rather than fear of losses (Colquitt, LePine, Piccolo, Zapata, & Rich, 2012; Dimoka, 2010; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Thus, people are more likely to trust others when appraising environmental stressors as challenges versus threats. Kong (2013a) argued that climatic demands activate the need for psychological comfort and social connectedness, and thus, may foster generalized trust under certain circumstances. In comparison to threat appraisals, challenge appraisals of environmental stressors are more conducive to collective security, social equality, self-expression, and personal growth (Van de Vliert, 2013), which are strongly associated with generalized trust (Ferrin & Gillespie, 2010; Kong, 2013b; Rothstein & Uslander, 2005). Wealth provides resources for people's buffering against thermal threats, influences people's perceptions of climatic

² I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for his/her suggestion of including this debate in the introduction.

³ Population genetics is “the study of the gene frequency distribution in populations and its change under the influence of the four evolutionary forces: natural selection, genetic drift, mutation, and gene flow” (Kim et al., 2012, p. 917; see Hartl, 2000).

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