



Reconceptualizing trust: A non-linear Boolean model



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ABSTRACT

Although ability, benevolence, and integrity are generally recognized to be three key characteristics of trustworthiness that explain much of the within-truster variation in trustworthiness, some researchers have noted conceptual issues regarding how these characteristics are related to trust and have detected empirical inconsistencies in past research. The present paper suggests that in many contexts, the three characteristics of trustworthiness are non-linearly related to trusting behaviors and tests this idea via a multi-method approach (two laboratory experiments and a qualitative organizational study). The results of the three studies strongly support the validity and usefulness of the non-linear relationship hypothesized between ability, benevolence, and integrity.

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1. Introduction

The construct of trust has been widely researched in different domains, including organizational studies, economics, psychology and sociology (e.g., [3,6,11,20]). According to a generally accepted definition, trust is "...the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the truster, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party" ([20], p. 712). In the same well-cited review paper, Mayer et al. [20] also identified ability, benevolence, and integrity to be three key characteristics of trustworthiness that help explain much of the within-truster variation observed in trust. Ability (or competence) represents the skills or expertise that one party has that enables it to have influence in a given domain. Benevolence reflects a truster's perception of how positive an orientation the trustee has towards him or her, i.e., how much the truster perceives the trustee to have the truster's interests at heart. Finally, integrity is the truster's perception "...that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the truster finds acceptable" (p. 719).

Following Mayer et al. [20], many organizational researchers have conceptualized and empirically supported a latent construct of trust reflected by ability, benevolence and integrity (e.g.,

[8,13,14,18,22]). However, a meta-analysis by Colquitt et al. [6] raised concerns regarding the mixed relationships observed in past research between trust and the three characteristics, concluding that a key question was whether "...all facets of trustworthiness—ability, benevolence, and integrity—have significant, unique relationships with trust, and how strong are those relationships?" ([6], p. 910). Other researchers have raised similar concerns (e.g. [26]), underscoring the need to carefully examine these relationships (e.g., [21]) and noting that "...perceptions about trustworthiness lead to decisions about willingness to be vulnerable, which in turn translate into a variety of trusting behaviors. Nevertheless, we know of few studies that actually validate this entire causal chain of events" ([21], p. 40). The present study suggests that for certain boundary conditions, a non-linear Boolean conceptualization of the relationship between the three characteristics of trustworthiness and trust can provide a more parsimonious and powerful model than the traditional linear relationship that past research has assumed to exist between these characteristics and trust. To examine this idea, an experimental study was first conducted to investigate the viability of the proposed conceptualization in an artificial setting via a game theoretical approach. Based on the encouraging results of Study 1, the proposed conceptualization was then examined in Study 2 with qualitative data collected in an IT project setting, providing triangulation evidence and support for the proposed conceptualization in an IS context. The results of Study 2 also suggested an extension of the proposed conceptualization that addressed situations with incomplete information. This idea was tested in Study 3, which

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repeated the experiment of Study 1, but this time by including conditions with incomplete information. Its results provided further evidence of the utility of the proposed conceptualization.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 that follows, the theoretical development and justification of the proposed conceptualization is discussed. Section 3, in which the method and results of each of the three studies are described in turn and the findings are discussed. This is followed by a Section 4, in which the findings of the three studies and their theoretical and practical implications are discussed from an overall perspective. Section 4 also provides ideas and suggestions for future research while acknowledging some limitations of the study. Finally, Section 5 ends with a short conclusion that summarizes the paper's key contributions.

2. Theory

It is generally agreed that trust is influenced by ability, benevolence and integrity [6,26] and that "...all three factors of ability, benevolence, and integrity can contribute to trust in a group or organization" ([26], p. 345). These authors also provide a buyer-supplier example to illustrate that a buyer's beliefs concerning the supplier's ability to supply a high-quality product suggest only that the supplier could deliver such a product but not that the supplier will do so, and hence, ability alone would not be enough for a buyer to trust a supplier. Similarly, knowing that a supplier has integrity indicates only that it will try to fulfil its agreements as promised. However, if the supplier's capability is not assured, then the fact that it has integrity will not be sufficient for the buyer to trust it. Finally, the perception that the supplier is benevolent indicates that it will try very hard to satisfy the buyer's needs. However, if the buyer is unsure about the supplier's integrity (e.g., due to its inconsistent track record with other buyers), then it will not necessarily trust the supplier. Hence, according to [26], "As the perception of each of these factors increases, we would expect an increase in willingness to take a risk in the relationship" ([26], p. 346).

However, Colquitt et al.'s [6] meta-analysis and Schoorman et al.'s [26] review have also underscored empirical and theoretical concerns regarding a lack of independence between benevolence and integrity. For example, although some studies have observed high correlations between benevolence and integrity, others have failed to observe significant, unique effects for both (e.g., [15,19]), prompting Colquitt et al. [6] to conclude that "...it may also be that the effects of the two character facets—benevolence and integrity—are redundant with each other" (p. 911).

Reviewing trust research, Schoorman et al. [26] expressed a similar conceptual concern and provided a theoretically plausible explanation for the mixed results regarding the benevolence-integrity-trust relationship. Specifically, they noted that whereas judgments of ability and integrity could form relatively quickly in the course of a relationship, benevolence judgments needed more time to develop. They also concluded that "...studies conducted in laboratory settings were more likely to show a high correlation between benevolence and integrity because the relationships had not had time to develop any real data about benevolence. In field samples where the parties had longer relationships, benevolence and integrity were more likely to be separable factors. We continue to find this pattern to be consistent in our research" (p. 346).

Thus, the mixed results of past research and the above theoretical considerations suggest that it would be useful to take into account the contextual characteristics of different trust situations to more clearly identify trust's determinants. For example, Schoorman et al.'s [26] point regarding the long time it takes benevolence judgments to develop suggests that time

could be a potentially important boundary condition. Thus, when studying parties who are interacting for the first time, with no prior history or relationship between them, e.g., studies of initial trust, benevolence could be hypothesized to be unlikely to significantly influence trust or to provide largely redundant information with integrity.

A theoretical explanation of the overlap between benevolence and integrity can also be found in the idea that two key motivational determinants of trust are notions of "can do" and "will do," where "...ability captures the "can-do" component of trustworthiness by describing whether the trustee has the skills and abilities needed to act in an appropriate fashion. In contrast, the character variables [i.e., integrity and benevolence] capture the "will-do" component by describing whether the trustee will choose to use those skills and abilities to act in the best interests of the truster. Such "can-do" and "will-do" explanations of volitional behavior tend to exert effects independent of one another..." ([6], pp. 910–911). Because benevolence and integrity both reflect the "will-do" aspect, the extent of their overlap will likely depend on the specific contexts examined by different researchers, suggesting that their high correlation and lack of significant unique effects can stem from their overlap in contexts that are largely governed by economic rationality. For example, in e-commerce transaction contexts (e.g., [13,16,27]), when parties interact for the first time and a buyer has accurate information about a seller's ability and integrity (i.e., honesty), the buyer is unlikely to need information about the seller's benevolence to trust the seller. Hence, as noted above, in contexts of initial trust where economic rationality operates, trust will likely be influenced essentially by ability and integrity, with benevolence providing mostly redundant information to that communicated by integrity. Similarly, when a buyer has accurate information about a seller's ability and benevolence, it can decide to trust the seller without needing to know about the seller's integrity (in contexts of initial trust). These considerations suggest that first-time interactions between parties that operate under economic rationality, e.g., buyers and sellers in e-commerce contexts, provide key boundary conditions under which the ability plus either the integrity or the benevolence of a party may be sufficient for the other party to consider it trustworthy in making a trusting decision. Formally, this non-linear link between ability, benevolence, integrity, and trust is represented by a Boolean relationship, where:

$$\text{Trust} = f[(\text{Ability}) \text{ AND } (\text{Benevolence OR Integrity})]$$

In Section 2 that follows, we describe three studies (an experiment in an artificial setting, a qualitative study in an IT project context, and a second experiment in an artificial setting) that were conducted to investigate the proposed non-linear Boolean relationship.

3. Method

Three studies were conducted to examine the proposed relationship between the three characteristics of trustworthiness and trust in contexts of initial trust. Study 1 operationalized the study constructs in a game theoretic experiment as an initial test of the viability of the proposed model. Following its encouraging results, qualitative data collected in a different study were recoded and analyzed in Study 2 to provide triangulation evidence for the proposed model in an IS project management context. Finally, based on the findings of the two studies, the non-linear model was extended to contexts where information about one of the three characteristics of trustworthiness would be lacking, and the extended model was tested Study 3.

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