

Cross-cultural measurement of supervisor trustworthiness: An assessment of measurement invariance across three cultures

S. Arzu Wasti^{a,*}, Hwee Hoon Tan^{b,1}, Holly H. Brower^{c,2}, Çetin Önder^{d,3}

^a Sabanci University, Faculty of Management, Orhanli 34956 Tuzla, Istanbul, Turkey

^b Singapore Management University Lee Kong Chian School of Business, 50 Stamford Road, Singapore 178899, Singapore

^c Calloway School of Business and Accountancy, Wake Forest University, Reynolda Station, Winston-Salem, NC 27109, USA

^d Sabanci University, Faculty of Management, Orhanli 34956 Tuzla, Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract

This paper contributes to the research on supervisor trustworthiness by assessing the measurement equivalence of the trust scales developed by Mayer and Davis [Mayer, R. C., & Davis, J. H. (1999). The effect of the performance appraisal system on trust for management: A field quasi-experiment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84, 123–136] across three samples: U.S., Turkey and Singapore. This study found the trust scale to have poor psychometric properties across the board, rendering invariance tests inappropriate. Analysis of the antecedents of trust scales supported the metric equivalence of the integrity measure, but several items of the ability and benevolence scales appeared to be interpreted differently by respondents from collectivist-high power distant versus individualist-low power distant cultures. We advocate the formation of a multinational team of trust and leadership scholars to develop scales in which items reflect not a single culture but are more applicable both in meaning and choice of expression to many cultures.

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1. Introduction

Research on interpersonal trust, its antecedents and subsequent organizational effects has spanned several decades, but refining and developing our understanding of trust in organizational settings has been particularly strong in the last decade (e.g. Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Recent research has focused on trust as a psychological state that develops over time between two or more individuals developed as a result of a social exchange process (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000; Currall & Judge, 1995; Hosmer, 1995; Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 216 4839662; fax: +90 216 483 9699.

E-mail addresses: awasti@sabanciuniv.edu (S.A. Wasti), hhtan@smu.edu.sg (H.H. Tan), browerhh@wfu.edu (H.H. Brower), cetinonder@su.sabanciuniv.edu (Ç. Önder).

¹ Tel.: +65 68280524; fax: +65 68280777.

² Tel.: +1 336 758 6174.

³ Now at Dokuz Eylül University Faculty of Business, Buca, İzmir. Tel.: +90 232 453 5060; fax: +90 232 453 5062.

Since the publication of a special issue of *Academy of Management Review* in 1998 devoted to trust, the model of the construct developed by Mayer et al. (1995) has become widely accepted and used in organizational research (Dirks, 1999; Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust as defined by Mayer et al. is specific to the domain of interpersonal work relationships, particularly the relationship between supervisors and subordinates. In this model, trust is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.” (Mayer et al., 1995: 712). This vulnerability leaves the trustor open to the possibility of disappointment or betrayal. Mayer et al. (1995) further assert that the antecedents to trust include perceptions of the trustee’s (supervisor’s) ability, integrity and benevolence toward the trustor (subordinate) in the situation. Ability is an assessment of the group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that the trustor believes the trustee has in a given context. Benevolence is the degree to which the trustee is believed to have the best interests of the trustor in mind. Finally, integrity is the extent to which the trustor believes the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable. In addition, each trustor has a propensity to trust that is an individual difference that sets the base level of trust at the beginning of a relationship.

1.1. Linkages between leadership and trust

Using this model of trust, Brower et al. (2000) developed a model of relational leadership. Since both trust and leader–member exchange (LMX), a popular model of the leadership relationship between supervisors and subordinates, are shaped through the social exchange process, they integrated these two theories to model trust as a motivational engine for leaders. Trust has been included as one of the foundations of relationship quality between supervisors and their subordinates in LMX research (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998). Empirical research on LMX has found that trusting relationships, characterized as high LMX, are associated with increased subordinate job satisfaction (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Seers, 1989), performance (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994), commitment (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996), citizenship behaviors (Anderson & Williams, 1996) and reduced turnover (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). When studied outside of the LMX construct, trust has had similar effects on all of these same outcomes (Brower et al., 2000). Simply put: when leaders are viewed as trustworthy, subordinates are motivated to increase performance, demonstrate satisfaction and stay with the organization.

In other leadership theories that look at distant leaders, trust has also been a significant factor contributing to leader effectiveness. Specifically, theorists have asserted that trust in the leader is critical for charismatic or transformational leaders (House, 1976; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Tan & Wee, 2002). In fact, trust has been found to moderate the relationship between transformational/transactional leadership styles and subordinate outcomes (Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999; Podsakoff et al., 1990). Two cross-cultural studies are pertinent to this discussion. Tan & Wee (2002) studied the National Rally Day speeches of a Singaporean national leader and found that in his speeches, this charismatic leader portrayed self-confidence as a means of building trust from his followers. However, he did not amplify values and mention past success, which would be considered trust building tactics in a Western context. More recently, Casimir, Waldman, Bartram & Yang (2006) found that trust mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and subordinate citizenship behaviors in Australian subjects but not in Chinese subjects. They argued that in collectivist cultures heavily influenced by Confucian values supportive of power distance, individuals may be more accepting of autocratic leadership practices, but acceptance does not necessarily translate into trust in the leader. Further, they proposed that in low power distant cultures, transformational leadership behaviors such as showing respect and consideration, articulating a vision shared by followers, and showing determination toward achieving goals engender feelings of trustworthiness.

Both of these studies demonstrate the importance of understanding how trust develops across different contexts because leadership styles may have very different impacts on subordinate outcomes. Indeed, Doney, Cannon & Mullen (1998) underscored the importance of understanding the influence of culture on trust development by drawing attention to an increasingly multicultural work environment. Our premise is that to better understand the cultural implications of trust in organizational settings, we need measures that are valid across cultural boundaries. While the model developed by Mayer et al. (1995) has received both theoretical (Dirks, 1999; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Rousseau et al., 1998) as well as some empirical support (Davis, Schoorman, Mayer, & Tan, 2000; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Mayer & Gavin, 2005), the validity evidence remains limited to the U.S. context and the cross-cultural implications of this model have not been thoroughly considered. Consequently, we cannot make assertions about the explanatory power of trusting in leaders in other cultures.

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