



Modeling the trust-risk relationship in a wildland recreation setting: A social exchange perspective



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ABSTRACT

We empirically tested relationships among the characteristics of trustworthiness, trust instilled in river guides, and risks perceived by whitewater recreationists that rafted a Wild and Scenic River in the Southern Sierra Nevada, CA. Drawing on a social exchange framework, we used survey data to address the following objectives: (1) investigate three dimensions of trustworthiness, including ability, integrity, and benevolence; (2) examine trust in decisions and trust in values that recreationists associated with their river guides; and (3) determine the effects of trustworthiness and trust on recreationists' beliefs that river guides minimized psychological and social risks from rafting the Kern River. Results from a latent variable path model revealed that the ability and integrity of river guides played important roles in explaining why they were trusted by recreationists, which in turn positively influenced the extent to which guides were believed to minimize risk. Contrary to previous research, we found that trust in values did not play a substantive role in predicting risk perception. A greater understanding of the trust-risk relationship will shed light on how public land management agencies can effectively navigate risk in dangerous wildland environments and provide access to otherwise inaccessible resources owned and valued by the public.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Our results offer insight on how public land management agencies can negotiate risk and maintain high quality recreational opportunities afforded by wildland environments. Specifically, our study findings suggest:

- Whitewater recreationists may not be able to access and/or enjoy wildland environments without trust and trustworthiness garnered through interactions with river guides.
- The trust-risk relationship can be understood from a social exchange perspective.
- Trustworthiness is an important mechanism for explaining trust in decisions and trust in values.
- The extent to which river guides are thought to minimize risks can be predicted by the ability and integrity of a river guide and trust placed on their decisions.
- The benevolence of river guides does not factor into the formation of trust or the risk perceptions of whitewater recreationists.

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1. Introduction

Public land management agencies are responsible for providing an array of opportunities for the public to engage in outdoor

recreation activities, many of which are inherently dangerous, uncertain, and risky. Guides and outfitting concessions are instrumental in facilitating these opportunities, particularly in wildland settings. To effectively balance perceived and actual risks experienced by recreationists, commercial operators are advantaged if they foster trust and maintain cooperation among their clientele (Davenport, Leahy, Anderson, & Jakes, 2007; Stern &

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Baird, 2015; Winter, Palucki, & Burkhardt, 1999). Trust research in natural resource management contexts has indicated that shared goals, values, and opinions are predictors of risk perception (Liljeblad, Borrie, & Watson, 2009; Siegrist, Cvetkovich, & Roth, 2000; Winter & Cvetkovich, 2010) and can help decision makers anticipate public acceptance of agency action (Absher & Vaske, 2011; Needham & Vaske, 2008; Sponarski, Vaske, Bath, & Musiani, 2014). Trustworthiness also plays an important role in explaining the trust–risk relationship (Emerson, 1976; Molm, Takahashi, & PETERSON, 2000). However, few studies have incorporated the traits of trustworthiness – including ability, benevolence, and integrity – in models of the factors that influence the perceived risks of outdoor activities (Shooter, Paisley, & Sibthorp, 2010). Further inclusion of the trustworthiness concept in outdoor recreation research will provide insight on how agencies can optimize public enjoyment and management of natural resources, as well as stimulate discussions on the antecedent processes of risk perception.

Risk is at the heart of the wildland environment. In the United States (U.S.) for example, the preservation and conservation movements are rooted in nature's uncertainty and inherent variation across space and time. From the pioneers and early American settlers who aimed to conquer nature and expand westward across the continent to romanticists who glorified the rugged and sublime features of the outdoors, wildlands have been framed as places to be revered and respected (Nash, 2015). Western thinking has further situated these environments in a space of alterity, defined by nature–culture dualisms that consider people to be 'visitors' who remain fundamentally separated from the dangers of the outdoors (Braun, 2009; Cronon, 1995; Plumwood, 1998). This dichotomy of human–nature relationships has placed public land management agencies in positions of power and responsibility where they act as environmental stewards (Sellars, 1997) and facilitate social interactions that lead to an exchange of resources between recreationists and agencies. The socially valued outcomes that emerge from these interactions are reciprocally beneficial, and many become more noticeable when risk is brought to the fore (Molm et al., 2000). That is, recreation activities such as whitewater rafting are replete with uncertainty, dangers, and risks that are desirable yet simultaneously difficult to manage (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Dickson & Hall, 2006; Stewart et al., 2000). The ability of an agency to adequately maintain trust while ensuring safety under potentially dangerous circumstances, thus, becomes paramount (Lynch, Jonson, & Dibben, 2007).

To better understand the trust–risk relationship, we looked to a social exchange framework (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1961) for guidance on how to explain social structures such as those formed between recreationists and river guides. This framework provided a useful lens for viewing social phenomena in an outdoor recreation context given that the exchange of valued benefits can take multiple forms (direct versus indirect, negotiated versus reciprocal) and apply to various networks of people (Molm et al., 2000). At its core, the social exchange model presumes that people and organizations aim to maximize intended rewards and minimize unknown costs (Bagozzi, 1975). It also posits that an interdependency is formed when recreationists interact with other individuals, groups, or entities such as public land management agencies that make decisions or take actions on their behalf (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). The success of this relationship depends in part on the trust conferred on entities that lie in positions of power and the perceptions of risk that emerge when one person relies on another (Blau, 1964). In other words, the development of trust in a social exchange provides opportunity for people to demonstrate their trustworthiness, especially in light of risk and uncertainty (Kollock, 1994; Molm et al., 2000).

We used a social exchange framework to better understand a suite of factors that affected the perceived risks of whitewater

rafting, including the trustworthiness of river guides, alignment of values between recreationists and their guides, and resulting forms of trust that emerged from the association between recreationists–guide interactions. Whitewater rafting on a Wild and Scenic River in the western U.S. provided an ideal context for exploring the effects of trustworthiness and trust on risk perception, given that river guides were responsible for minimizing risk and providing access to areas that were otherwise inaccessible. A greater understanding of the trust–risk relationship will shed light on how agencies can effectively navigate risk in dangerous wildland environments and provide access to resources owned and valued by the public.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Trustworthiness

Over half a century of research has refined and focused scholars' conceptions of trust and trustworthiness (Becerra, Lunnan, & Huemer, 2008; Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007), leading to the understanding that these are two distinct, yet interrelated, constructs (Sharp, Thwaites, Curtis, & Millar, 2013; Stern & Coleman, 2015). According to Mayer et al. (1995), trust is "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to another party based on the expectation that another will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). Trustworthiness, on the other hand, denotes the characteristics of the trustee, which impart perceptions of trust in the trustor (Mayer & Davis, 1999). Thus, trust should be distinguished from its antecedent processes (i.e., trustworthiness) (Liljeblad et al., 2009) to better understand the multiple factors that influence public attitudes towards natural resource management decisions (Sharp et al., 2013; Stern & Baird, 2015).

Trustworthiness has been shown to develop from a collage of dispositional (Hardin, 2002), behavioral (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998), cognitive (Becerra et al., 2008), social (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011), and symbolic factors (Bandura, 1986; Cvetkovich & Winter, 2003). This is, in part, because trustworthiness occurs between and within individuals and organizations across a diversity of social spheres and settings (Ashleigh & Prichard, 2012; Caldwell & Clapham, 2003; Davis, Schoorman, Mayer, & Tan, 2000; Hardin, 2002). And by extension, the strength, duration, and objects of trustworthiness have been shown to fluctuate according to various context-specific factors such as the: (a) type and length of relationships among people (Cheshire, Gerbasi, & Cook, 2010; Levin, Whitener, & Cross, 2006); (b) ways in which information is presented (Cvetkovich & Winter, 2003); (c) type of knowledge being communicated (Becerra et al., 2008); and (d) personal meanings and definitions individuals attach to trust and use to evaluate others' trustworthiness (Sharp et al., 2013).

Similar to the increasing outgrowth of interdisciplinary scholarship on trust (see Stern & Coleman, 2015), trustworthiness is viewed through a variety of disciplinary lenses and underpinned by a corpus of theoretical perspectives about how and why these traits develop. Previous research has refined understanding of trustworthiness as representative of the "...characteristics of the trusted that make them worthy of trust..." (Hamm, 2014, p. 45). Of particular interest in the present study is the social exchange framework (Emerson, 1976) that complements Mayer et al.'s (1995) description of three trustworthiness characteristics that have developed across the past four decades: (1) *Ability*, (2) *Benevolence*, and (3) *Integrity*. According to Mayer et al. *Ability* is the "group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain" (p. 717). This

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