Chapter XI

A Belief-Based Model of Trust

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we present a socio-cognitive analysis of trust. In this model trust is conceived as a crucial attitude useful for delegating or not a specific task, and it is strongly based on specific beliefs, and on different cognitive ingredients. Characterising the basic elements on which trust is founded is very important not only for a psychological view of this phenomenon but also for better understanding how this attitude works. This model allows to distinguish between internal and external attributions (to the trustee) and for each of these kinds of attribution it allows to distinguish among several sub-components: competence, disposition, unharmfulness and so on. The analysis of the trust concept tries to show the importance of its role in knowledge management and systems in organisations. Trust is strongly supported by the organisation roles and functions, but in order to really understand how organisations work it is necessary to explore such inter-relational notions as delegation and trust.

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DEFINITION OF TRUST AND ITS COGNITIVE ANATOMY

When we trust someone, what kind of relationship are we establishing with that person? What about the minds of the interacting agents? Is trust a decision, a relationship or just a static disposition, an evaluation? What are the necessary ingredients of the mental state of trust? Are these ingredients useful for defining trust?

We do not have in cognitive and social sciences a shared or dominant, clear and convincing notion of trust. Every author working on trust frequently provides his or her own definition not really in a “general” sense, but aimed at being appropriated for a specific domain (commerce, politics, technology, etc.). Also those “general” definitions (with some cross-domain validity) are usually either incomplete or redundant. They miss or simply let implicit and give for presupposed important components, or they include something just accidental and domain specific.

Not only there is not a shared and dominant definition, but there is not even a clear model of trust as mental attitude (“I trust Mary but not enough to count on her”), as decision and action (“How could you trust Mary?!”), and as a social relationship (depending, counting on, not worrying about).

The aim of this chapter is to provide a general/abstract (domain independent) operational notion and model of trust, which moves from and specializes the common sense (natural languages) notion and the intuitive notions frequently used in the social sciences, but defines a technical scientific construct (for cognitive and social theory).

This model is based on a portrait of the mental state of trust in cognitive terms (beliefs, goals). This is not a complete account of the psychological dimensions of trust: it represents the most explicit (reason-based) and conscious form. We do not account here for the more implicit forms of trust (for example, trust by default, not based upon explicit evaluations or beliefs or derived from previous experience or other sources) or for the affective dimensions of trust, based not on explicit evaluations, but on emotional responses and an intuitive, unconscious appraisal.

Also the social and relational aspects are put aside in this chapter, because we think that the mental kernel is the basis of the rest and the first issue to be clarified.

We will specify which beliefs and which goals characterise X’s trust in another agent Y about Y’s behaviour/action α relevant for a given result (goal...
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