Chapter 17
The Role of Trust in Social Life

Yan Dong
Renmin University of China, China

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the literature of trust in sociology and psychology. By introducing the conception, theory model and measurement of trust, we discuss trust in three important social contexts: interpersonal situation, organizational settings and Internet life. Furthermore, the author proposes a synthetic trust model with a multi-disciplinary approach as a future research direction and described its implications for trust study.

INTRODUCTION

Trust plays an important role in our social life not only for individuals but also for organizations. It is an essential component of social capital, especially for adults (Paxton, 1999). Trust is also very important for children’s development. Children who fail to trust others might fall into the risk of developing a defensive or antagonistic posture and may view social relations as “get them before they get you.” Lack of trust has been consistently implicated in the development of maladjustment including socially irresponsible criminal and delinquent behavior (Rotenberg, 1984). On the other hand, recent research has highlighted trust’s potential value in understanding the performance of health care organizations (Goold, 2001) and health systems (Gilson, 2003; Goudge, 2005). Particularly, trust has been identified as an important aspect of prosocial human behavior and experience at individual and organizational level (Schindler & Thomas, 1993). With regard to organization, the trust that individuals have with each other is the foundation of organizational effectiveness (Ferrin & Dirks, 2006). Indeed, recent evidence indicates that interpersonal trust has direct or indirect effects on a number of desired outcomes such as individuals’ work performance, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, and working group’s performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001, 2002; Kramer, 1999).

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Moreover, trust also plays in a crucial role in virtual life. Nowadays, many researches have been focusing on trust issues in electronic commerce. As accepted in the literature, trust is an indispensable component of online exchange and communications (e.g. friend-making), which are characterized by uncertainty, anonymity, lack of control, and potential opportunism (Dirks, 1999).

This book chapter studies the role of trust in social life and reviews the state art of trust research in the areas of psychology and sociology. We aim to help readers understand why trust is very important in social life by evaluating it in three important social contexts: interpersonal situation, organizational settings, and internet life. We also present our perspectives on the issues and controversies in this area, as well as solutions. Finally, the implications for future studies are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Trust issues in social life have led to many researches. Different researches are based on different concepts, theories, models and measurement methods in order to examine the role of trust in social life.

Conception of Trust

Trust is a key concept in many social situations ranging from interpersonal relationships to economic exchange (Miller, 2003). However, trust is a very complicated phenomenon attached to multiple disciplines and influenced by many factors. It is hard to say what trust exactly is and there is no well-established definition of trust. We can find various definitions of trust in the literature (Rotenberg, 2005). For example, it can be loosely defined as “a state involving confident positive expectations about another’s motives with respect to oneself in situations entailing risk” (Boon & Holmes, 1991). Deutsch (1958, pp. 266) asserted that “an individual may be said to have trust in the occurrence of an event if he expects its occurrence and his expectation lead to a behavior which he perceives to have greater negative motivational consequences if the expectation is not confirmed than positive motivational consequences if it is confirmed.” In developmental psychology, although trust has been defined in very different ways over the past four decades, most researches are consistent with either Erikson’s or Rotter’s theories (Bernath, 1995). Erikson (1950) viewed trust as a foundation for identity development, as a pervasive way of sensing and behaving within the world, and as a critical step for the subsequent emergence of positive self-esteem and general psychological health. Rotter (1967, 1971) held the opinion that trust is integral to individuals’ social functioning, the organization, survival, and the efficiency of society, as well as societies’ local, national, and international relations. Rotter (1967) defined trust as the generalized expectancy that other individuals will keep their word or promises. Overall, the definition of trust broadly accepted is presented by Mayer (1995). Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman (1995) defined trust as “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 trustor, irrespective of the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.”

Although the concept of trust has gained popularity in public debate and academic analysis over recent years and it is still difficult to define and to investigate, these definitions of trust are nonetheless related to each other (Mayer et al., 1995; Goudge, 2005). Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie (2006) concluded the theoretical approaches and empirical evidence of trust. They conceptualized trust from the view of behavioral and psychological approach development.

In the Behavior Tradition

Trust is often defined in terms of choice behavior, which is derived from confidence and expecta-
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