To Trust or Not to Trust?

An Experimental Assessment of Followers' Decisions to Trust Leaders

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Abstract

(In the Submission System Only due to the 1,500 Word Limit)

Follower trust is an essential component of effective leadership. Indeed, followers are not just passive observers, but active and often overlooked components of what makes leaders. But while trustworthiness has dominated scholarly discussions of the antecedents of trust, there is increasing consensus that we need to take a broader view. While trust motivation (i.e., the desire to be vulnerable in order to build or maintain particular relationships), has become a theme in theoretical discussions of trust, there remains a lack of empirical evidence testing these ideas. In response, we empirically test the role of trust motivation as an antecedent for trust in leaders across three experimental studies; we present two of the studies here and outline one which is planned to be completed prior to FINT 2022.

Introduction

Follower trust is an essential component of effective leadership. Indeed, followers are not just passive observers, but active and often overlooked components of what makes leaders through their energy, engagement, and legitimizing their role (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Van Vugt, 2006). While trustworthiness has dominated scholarly discussions of the antecedents of trust, there is increasing consensus that we need to take a broader view (Baer et al., 2018; Möllering, 2020). While the desire to be vulnerable in order to build or maintain particular relationships, known as trust motivation, has become a theme in theoretical discussions of trust (e.g., van der Werff et al., 2019; Williams, 2001), there remains a lack of empirical evidence testing these ideas. In response, the aim of this paper is to empirically test the role of trust motivation as an antecedent for trust in leaders across three experimental studies. In doing so, we causally test theoretical propositions from the model of leader-follower trust decisions by van der Werff and colleagues (2019).

This research offers three main contributions to the literature on trust. First, we contribute to knowledge on the antecedents of trust by offering empirical evidence of the role of trust motivation in driving trust decisions. Exploring the idea that trust can be a motivated process also opens significant avenues for further understanding of processes beyond initial trust decisions. Second, our findings inform theory regarding the fragility or robustness of trust by proposing that relative fragility depends on the type of motivation underlying the decision to trust. Third, we offer a methodological contribution. Integrating randomized assignment via our recall experiment in Study 3, we minimize demand effects while also offering an ecologically valid measure of our key outcome—followers' trust toward their real-world leaders—while retaining rigorous inference regarding the causal link between follower trust motivations and trusting behavior towards leaders.

Study 1

In Study 1, we test the interaction of leader trustworthiness and follower trust motivations on follower trust in the leader with an experimental vignette study. Based on van der Werff and colleagues (2019), we predict a main effect of follower trust motivation, such that followers with higher trust motivation will have higher trust towards leaders, particularly for autonomous forms of trust motivation (i.e., intrinsic and identified) compared to extrinsic trust motivation. In addition to predicting a main effect of leader trustworthiness, we also predict an interaction between trust motivation and leader trustworthiness, such that followers' trust motivations will have a stronger effect on trust in leaders who are less trustworthy, as the desire to trust will compensate for the leaders' lack of trustworthiness.

Sample & Procedure

We recruited 231 American adults via Prolific Academic. We excluded 9 participants due to incomplete responses for a final sample of 222 (47.3% women, 52.7% men). Average age was 32.07 years (*SD* = 9.98). Average work experience was 12.72 years (*SD* = 9.92).

Participants were randomly assigned to view a leader with high or low trustworthiness in 1 of 3 trust motivation conditions (i.e., intrinsic, identified, or extrinsic), for a 2 × 3 between-subjects design. All manipulations were conveyed via brief textual descriptions paired with images to increase realism and strengthen the manipulations (see supplement).

Measures

Leader trust. We assessed cognitive and affective trust in the leader with a 5-item scale from McAllister (1995) from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"; α = .94).

Manipulation checks. We measured leaders' perceived trustworthiness with 17 items from Mayer and Davis' (1999) trustworthiness scale, measured from 1 ("disagree strongly") to 5 ("agree strongly"). This scale comprises 3 dimensions, which we summed for an overall

indicator of leaders' trustworthiness (α = .96). We also presented participants with single items with high face validity for each relevant aspect of trust motivation.

Results

Our manipulations were successful (see supplement). While identification and intrinsic trust motivations did not differ in predicting leader trust (b = 0.07, SE_{robust} = .13, p = .604), extrinsic (vs. identification) trust motivation predicted less leader trust (b = -0.44, SE_{robust} = .15, p = .004) and extrinsic (vs. intrinsic) trust motivation predicted less leader trust (b = -0.38, SE_{robust} = .14, p = .006). High (vs. low) trustworthy leaders received more trust (b = 1.82, SE_{robust} = .11, p < .001). But these effects were qualified by significant interactions, such that the effect of identification (vs. extrinsic) motivation was stronger for low (vs. high) trustworthy leaders (b = -1.01, SE_{robust} = .28, p < .001); a similar pattern was found for intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) trust motivation (b = -0.57, SE_{robust} = .26, p = .029; see Figure 1). While the effects of intrinsic and identification trust motivations significantly differed from extrinsic motivation at high (vs. low) leader trustworthiness, these effects did not differ from each other, $\chi^2(1) = 3.02$, p = .082. These results generally support our predictions.

Study 2

In Study 2, we aim to replicate the findings from Study 1 in a different sample and with a more robust design (e.g., different leader names and a larger sample for higher powered analyses). We also aim to extend the theoretical and practical implications of these results by testing which trust motivations are more resistant to trust violations. Specifically, we expect that when followers experience autonomous trust motivation, their trust in the leader will be more robust in the face of trust violation.

Sample & Procedure

We recruited 378 American adults via Qualtrics panel data service. We excluded 69 participants due to multiple participations and incorrect manipulation checks, leaving a final

sample of 309 (68.9% women, 30.7% men, 0.3% non-binary). Average age was 38.41 years (*SD* = 11.20). Average work experience was 18.32 years (*SD* = 11.47).

The design and manipulations mirrored Study 1, with the addition of trust violations (affective or cognitive) for a 2 × 3 × 2, between-subjects design. Participants were also randomly assigned to view 1 of 3 versions of the same stimuli materials, identical except for the leader's name (see the supplement for complete materials).

Measures

We assessed leader trust (α = .91) and manipulation checks as in Study 1.

Results

Our manipulations were successful (see the supplement). Identification and intrinsic trust motivations did not differ in predicting leader trust (b = -0.08, SE_{robust} = .18, p = .658), but extrinsic (vs. identification) trust motivation predicted less leader trust (b = -0.34, SE_{robust} = .16, p = .029), replicating Study 1. High (vs. low) trustworthy leaders received more trust (b = 0.68, SE_{robust} = .17, p < .001), also replicating Study 1. Finally, an affective (vs. cognitive) trust violation predicted less leader trust (b = -0.42, SE_{robust} = .07, p < .001). Although these effects were not qualified by a 3-way interaction for identification (vs. intrinsic) trust motivation (b = 1.13, SE_{robust} = .97, p = .245), the 3-way interaction for extrinsic (vs. intrinsic) trust motivation approached significance (b = 1.18, SE_{robust} = .65, p = .068), which was even stronger predicting the subcomponent affective trust (b = 1.58, SE_{robust} = .82, p = .053). While the effects of autonomous forms of trust motivation were consistently more strongly positive than extrinsic trust motivation, only the effect of intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) trust motivation differed from zero for high trustworthy leaders after a cognitive trust violation (b = 0.80, SE_{robust} = .12, p < .001). See the supplement for pairwise comparisons. These results only partially support our predictions.

Study 3

In Study 3, we extend our investigation to also test how followers' trust motivations predict their actual trust decisions towards leaders, triangulating results with a new experimental design. Again, we look to test the propositions of van der Werff et al (2019) relating to the robustness of trust following trust violations for the three types of trust motivation.

Sample & Procedure

We will recruit 500 employed American adults via Prolific Academic. We will pre-register it (on AsPredicted.org) and provide our data (on the Open Science Framework).

Participants will be randomly assigned to 1 of 3 conditions and asked to respond to a trust motivation scale (either measuring intrinsic, identified, or extrinsic) about their current manager. Because we found few differences in how trust motivations interact with different kinds of trust violations in Study 2, we use a simplified design wherein participants will recall a time when their manager violated (vs. did not violate) their trust (based on Grube et al., 2008; and Kahneman et al., 2004). Thus, this is a 3 (trust motivation) x 2 (violation/no violation), between-subjects design. Participants will then report their trust in their manager.

Discussion

In two experiments, we examined the self-regulatory processes involved in followers' decisions to trust leaders. We causally tested, replicated, and supported theoretical propositions from the leader-follower trust decisions model by van der Werff and colleagues (2019). In doing so, we also answer calls to rigorously test proliferating theoretical propositions in management science (e.g., Edwards, 2010). While our results converged across designs, partially supporting our expectations thus far, we will continue this research with Study 3; we hope to share it with you at FINT 2022.

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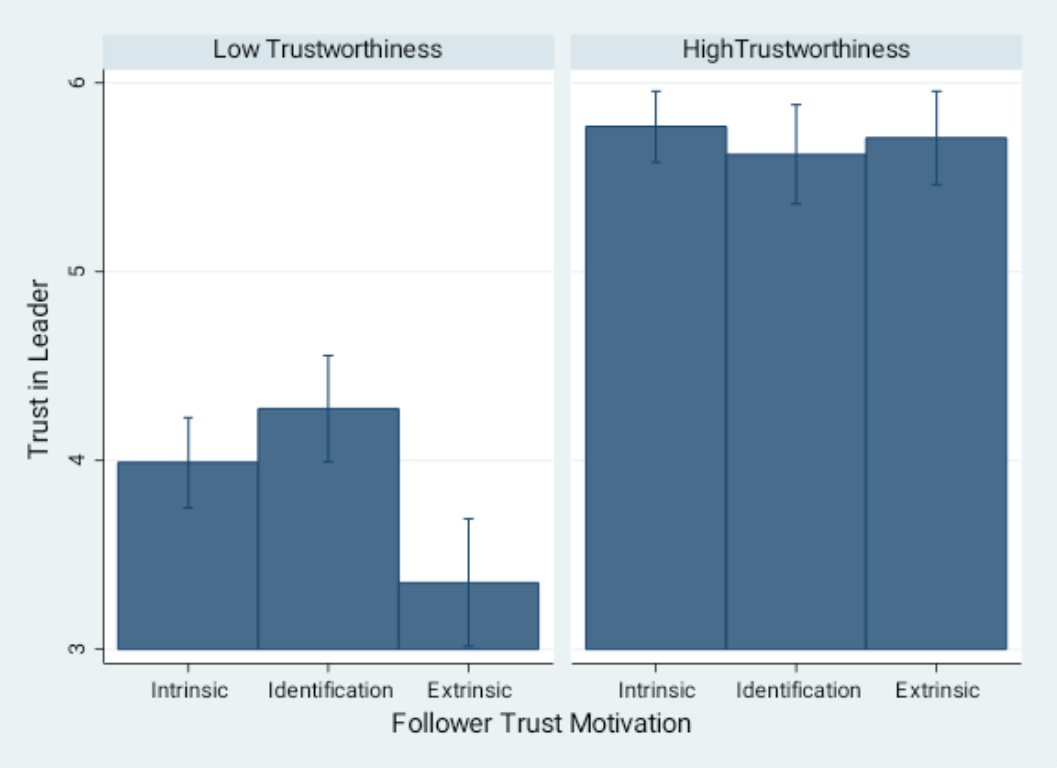

*Figure 1***.** Followers' Ascribed Affective and Cognitive Trust in the Leader by Leader Trustworthiness and Follower Trust Motivation (Study 1)**.** *N* = 222.

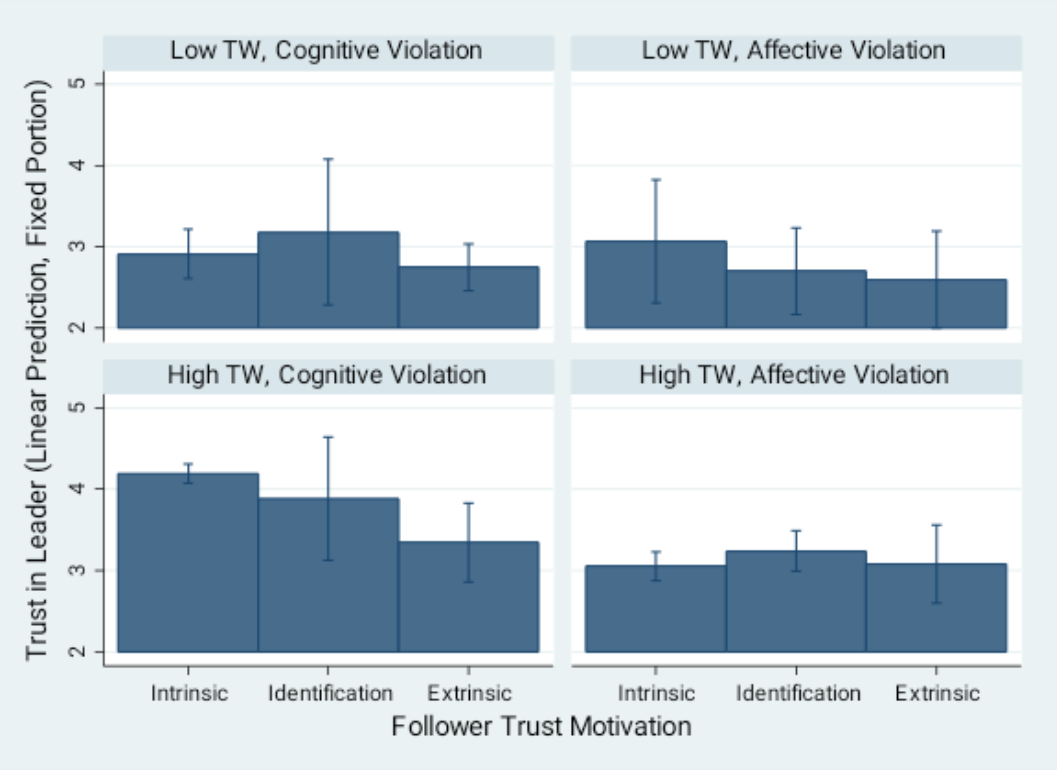

*Figure 2***.** Followers' Ascribed Affective and Cognitive Trust in the Leader by Leader Trustworthiness (TW) and Leader Trust Violation (Study 2)**.** *N* = 309.