

RECONCEPTUALIZING TRUST: AN EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS MODEL

James M. Curran, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI
Deborah E. Rosen, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI

ABSTRACT

The literature has, historically, acknowledged that trust evolves between parties, indicating a dynamic state of affairs. Yet trust has generally been operationalized as a static state of affairs within the relationship; that is, it either exists or does not exist between partners. One question that has been overlooked is how do the partners in a relationship come to trust one another or fail to trust? Perhaps even more important to an understanding of trust is the question of whether trust itself changes throughout the life of a relationship.

Existing research has yielded a myriad of variables associated with trust but has reached no consensus on the point at which they are found in a relationship or if they are found at all in every trust based relationship. If the construct of trust is easily defined as existent or not, then there should also be a consistency found in the underlying variables used to measure trust. With no consistent explanation, it becomes necessary to look at alternative conceptualizations of the trust construct to understand why certain attributes are found at some times but not others. The perspective taken in this paper is that trust is not merely a state of being, as it has been operationalized, but is a dynamic process with distinct and identifiable stages where different dimensions are needed to fully understand the role of trust in differing stages of the relationship.

Given that trust is a major factor in relationships, it is important to examine how trust may change over the life of the relationship. Authors have proposed a vast number of antecedents and consequences of trust, but have been unable to present a consistent picture of the critical elements. Different elements of trust may be more relevant to the individual stages of development within relationships. This paper conceptualizes four stages of trust, all linked in such a way that the outcomes of one stage are the antecedents of the next. Consideration of trust in this framework allows the explanation of why certain attributes of trust have been found important in some studies but not others. Not all relationships are in the same stage of development and some may never reach the level of maturity that requires fully trusting behaviors. However, as partners progress through the development of trust, certain dimensions will assume greater importance in some stages and have a lesser, or possibly nonexistent, impact in other stages.

It has been useful to examine trust under the accepted condition of whether it exists between partners or not, to identify associated variables and to provide a basis for more complex conceptualizations. This dichotomous view, however, has limited the growth of our understanding of trust. What should be of more interest to researchers is not whether trust exists, but how it exists, once the partners have crossed the boundary into a trust based relationship. We define two conceptually distinct levels of trust, beyond the simple existence of trust, which can more adequately explain the divergent findings found in existing literature on trust. If this is an accurate conceptualization of the construct, it is no longer useful to view all trusting relationships as being the same.