Abstract

Research on trust has recently witnessed a surge of scholarly interest into felt trust, resulting in cumulative evidence of its beneficial outcomes (which we summarize in a small-scale meta-analysis). Various theories were being proposed and tested to explain why felt trust affect these outcomes. Although research on felt trust has made impressive progress within its short life span, extant research has tended to focus on a single theory and a single referent of trust (i.e., supervisor). This paper aims to address these issues by adopting a multi-theoretical and multi-referent approach, examining three theoretical perspectives (social exchange, self-evaluation, conservation of resources theory) across two referents of trust (supervisor, teammates). We test our model using a multi-organizational sample, involving 182 supervisors and 651 team members. While the results show a lack of support for the social exchange perspective both across referents and across outcomes, our analyses suggest that the predictive validity of the other two perspectives are referent- and/or outcome-specific. Specifically, whereas self-evaluation theory explains why felt trust enhances task performance, employee’s contribution to their team, and creativity, but only for the supervisor referent of trust, conservation of resources theory explains felt trust effects across referents, but only in relation to contribution to the team. In doing so, our findings offer important insights into the validity and complementarity of different theoretical explanations of felt trust, and the generalizability of these explanations across referents of trust.

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All interested are welcome.