

Trust as a polymorphous phenomenon

Psychological specificity of trust in communal-sharing and market-pricing relations

Being part of modern society, we engage in various relationships. Some of them are close, intimate, and based on care, such as those between close friends or parents and children. Other relationships are limited to specific transactions and concentrate on gains and losses, such as those between buyers and sellers. Psychologists call the former “communal” and the latter “market” relationships. Some relations are even more complicated, as they include both communal and market elements, such as care and potential monetary benefits. For example, teachers take care of young students at school and they do not expect a direct payment from children, but receive a salary from the school administration. In all these cases, people want to form a “good relationship” and they may reach that by forming trust. But does trusting close friends or family members mean, on the psychological level, the same as trusting partners in business or in economic exchanges? Consider the two following examples. John is a contractor who has done a few jobs for you over the past several years. He always finishes the jobs on time and scrupulously accounts for the money he spent. You trust him to do the job well and not to overcharge you. But John is not a person that you would be willing to entrust your secret to, as your relationship is purely professional. On the other hand, Ben is one of your best friends and you trust him completely. Although there are hardly any expectations between you, you know you can always count on each other, regardless of the situation. Undoubtedly, the way in which you would develop trust for John and Ben would differ. Consider a third example. Frank is one of your most trusted friends. One day you ask him for a loan since you are short on money. He agrees but asks you to sign a written contract. How would you feel in such a situation?

The interplay of trust and relational modes is what we plan to investigate in our project. Up to this point, most studies examined trust within the bounds of a specific field—such as psychology, economics, organizational behavior—which makes it difficult to compare results across domains and, therefore, it remains virtually unknown how the dynamics of trust in the communal domain differ from its dynamics in the organizational or market-exchange domain. Our project is guided by an interdisciplinary approach to the study of trust. We will measure trust as a behavior and analyze the cognitive, affective, and motivational aspects associated with the formation of trust in the two types of relationships, thereby integrating the behavioral approach with the psychological approach.

The project is divided into three, interrelated research tasks. In Task 1, we will examine what cues trigger the perception of a specific relation as communal or market-like, and investigate how this perception relates to the level of trust exhibited in such a situation. The starting point of this task would be a meta-analysis exploring how experimental design features that cue communal-sharing or market-pricing modes affect the level of trust in Trust Game, followed by a series of experiments testing the impact of market-pricing and communal-sharing cues and their consistency on the perception of specific situations as market or communal, as well as on trust. In Task 2, we will investigate specificity of trust in communal and market contexts with respect to the goal of trust and the goal of these relationships. In Task 3, we will explore mechanisms and factors fostering the formation of trust in communal and market relationships. In this task, we will test four mechanisms responsible for differences in trust formation in communal and market relationships: 1) sensitivity to emotions; 2) the propensity to rely on cost-benefit analyses; 3) broad vs narrow bandwidth of trust; 4) direct vs indirect component of reputation.