

Revisiting the Foundations of Organizational Distrust

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ABSTRACT

Parallel to the very large scholarly interest in trust, scholars in management and related disciplines have made the case for the importance of distrust as a related but distinct construct. This paper critically assesses current literature on distrust in organizational settings. We first take stock of the extant research on organizational distrust and suggest an integrative framework.

Second, to underpin research on organizational distrust, we examine the different scholarly perspectives on the conceptual relationship between trust and distrust. In turn, we discuss key issues to position research on trust and distrust. Third, we highlight empirical evidence on the role of distrust as opposed to that of trust. We specifically discuss alternative approaches and implications about how

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distrust and trust can be empirically distinguished. Fourth, we make suggestions to integrate distrust research into relationship repair literature. Fifth, we summarize our review and point to specific areas for new theoretical and empirical research on distrust, particularly at the organizational level. Finally, we discuss specific empirical challenges in this growing literature. Based on our systematic discussion of the organizational distrust literature, we believe that we have opened up prospective avenues to advance distrust research in strategic management.

1

Introduction

Parallel to the very large scholarly interest in trust in an organizational context, researchers from a variety of disciplines—organization theory (*e.g.*, Sitkin and Roth, 1993), marketing (*e.g.*, Cho, 2006), international business (*e.g.*, MacDuffie, 2011), strategy (*e.g.*, Lumineau, 2017), information systems (*e.g.*, Dimoka, 2010), and psychology (*e.g.*, Kramer, 1999)—have started making significant progress in grasping distrust. While efforts are regularly being made to synthesize the works on trust (see Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012; Kramer and Lewicki, 2010; or Lewicki *et al.*, 2006 for recent reviews), the evidence accumulating on organizational distrust lacks coherence.

While social scientists have regarded trust as a critical element in social exchange (Blau, 1964), distrust is also at the heart of social relationships. Distrust has been linked to a large set of organizational issues ranging from intergroup behaviors (Insko and Schopler, 1997), revenge (Bies and Tripp, 1996), transaction costs (Levi *et al.*, 2004), cognitive processes (Fein, 1996; Hilton *et al.*, 1993), organizational control (Walgenbach, 2001), purchasing decisions (Cho, 2006), or interorganizational contracting (Connelly *et al.*, 2012a; Lumineau, 2017). Fifteen years ago, Kramer (1999) and Lewicki *et al.* (1998) pointed out the

importance of distrust in organizations and called for a more systematic study of this construct. However, Kramer's (1999) study mostly discussed the empirical antecedents and consequences of distrust and did not explicitly indicate how the extant research validated the necessity of additional distrust studies compared to trust studies. Lewicki *et al.* (1998), on the other hand, focused on providing evidence of the coexistence of trust and distrust but only shed some light on the conceptual relationship between trust and distrust, the coexistence of these two constructs, and their implications for strategic management. The current paper is different from these prior studies in that it does not avoid a comparison of distrust to trust. Rather, we systematically discuss the theoretical perspectives on the relationship between distrust and trust, highlight the potential research opportunities and challenges pertinent to distrust studies, and draw implications of distrust research for strategic management.

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the literature on distrust has grown substantially since the beginning of the 1960s.¹ One initial observation is that the extant research uses many different definitions and perspectives on distrust, and this diversity exacerbates the fragmentation of the literature. The variety of perspectives on distrust only re-emphasizes the necessity of gaining a better understanding of how distrust links to and distinguishes itself from trust before exploring the prospect and challenges of distrust research, particularly for scholars in strategic management. More specifically, it is crucial to draw attention to the novel insights that distrust studies may bring about for strategic management and organizational theory scholars. Hence, we organize our analysis into six parts: (a) discussing extant research on distrust in organizational settings; (b) examining various theoretical perspectives on the relationship between trust and distrust; (c) illustrating the extant empirical evidence of the relationship between trust and distrust; (d) considering the potential role of distrust in relationship repair; (e) pointing out

¹Although distrust has been discussed by philosophers for centuries (*e.g.* "Both oligarch and tyrant mistrust the people, and therefore deprive them of their arms"—Aristotle; "Objection, evasion, joyous distrust, and love of irony are signs of health; everything absolute belongs to pathology"—Friedrich Nietzsche), we traced back the first systematic discussion of distrust in social sciences at the beginning of the 1960s.

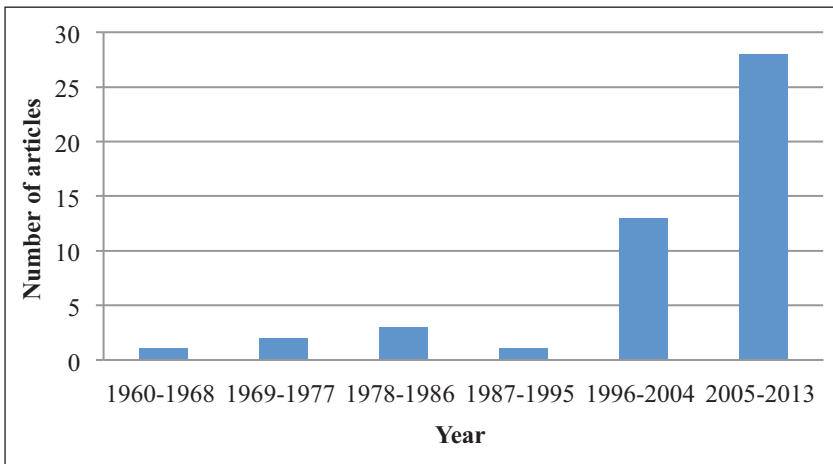


Figure 1.1: Growth in Studies on Distrust in Organizational Settings, 1960-2013.

Note: This figure is based on a computerized search of the Web of Knowledge, ProQuest, and Ebsco databases. We conducted our search with the primary keyword *distrust*, either as the topic of the study, or in its abstract, or in the whole document. Following the approach of prior reviews (e.g., Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012), we first focused on the 15 major management journals (*Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Business and Society*, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, *Personnel Psychology*, and *Strategic Management Journal*). This left us with a total of 68 papers.

We then undertook complementary manual searches in the 15 major journals, in the Social Sciences Citation Index using the seminal articles, and on the websites of contributors to look for other relevant papers and books (see Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012 for a similar approach). Through this manual search process, we identified several relevant books (e.g., Fox, 1974; Luhmann, 1979) and papers (e.g., Bies and Tripp, 1996; Worchel, 1979) that were not in our initial list. The review underpinning our arguments, therefore, has a broad approach by including both quantitative and qualitative studies, both theoretical and empirical works published in target journals, and relevant seminal articles outside the target journals as well as representative books. These papers and books were then read and coded by two independent coders and any differences were resolved through discussion.

specific research avenues in strategy areas; and (f) highlighting empirical challenges of studying distrust in organizational settings. Based on our examination of existing research on distrust in organizational settings in the first section, we extend our discussion to various theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence of the relationship between trust and distrust in the following sections. We also suggest specific promising research opportunities and challenges of distrust studies in the last three sections. As distrust spans many different research areas, we believe that our study is likely to interest scholars in management as well as in the sociology of organizations and organizational psychology.

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