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Trust as a Multilevel Phenomenon across Contexts:

Implications for Improved Interdisciplinarity in Trust Research

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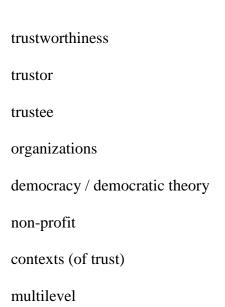
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Abstract

Examinations of trust have advanced steadily over the past several decades, yielding important insights within criminal justice, economics, environmental studies, management and industrial organization, psychology, political science, and sociology. Cross-disciplinary approaches to the study of trust, however, have been limited by differences in defining and measuring trust and in methodological approaches. In this chapter, we take the position that: 1) cross-disciplinary studies can be improved by recognizing trust as a multilevel phenomenon, and 2) context impacts the nature of trusting relations. We present an organizing framework for conceptualizing trust between trustees and trustors at person, group, and institution levels. The differences between these levels have theoretical implications for the study of trust and that might be used to justify distinctions in definitions and methodological approaches across settings. We highlight where the levels overlap and describe how this overlap has created confusion in the trust literature to date. Part of the overlap – and confusion – is the role of interpersonal trust at each level. We delineate when and how interpersonal trust is theoretically relevant to conceptualizing and measuring trust at each level and

suggest that other trust-related constructs, such as perceived legitimacy, competence, and integrity, may be more important than interpersonal trust at some levels and in some contexts. Translating findings from trust research in one discipline to another and collaborating across disciplines may be facilitated if researchers ensure that their levels of conceptualization and measurement are aligned, and that models developed for a particular context are relevant in other, distinct contexts.

As noted throughout this volume, trust is a critical concept across a wide array of domains. Within specific domains of research, prominent models of trust have been established. For example, in organizational scholarship a common method for the conceptualization and measurement of trust has been identified (the benevolence-integrity-ability model of trust; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). This model holds that the trustworthiness of an individual is dependent on his or her benevolence, integrity, and ability in the eyes of another. The model has been used in systematic reviews of the antecedents and outcomes of trust in organizational settings (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). In the study of risk management, research has begun to converge on a singular conceptualization and measurement of trust (Siegrist, Earle, & Gutscher, 2010). And in law, criminal justice, and policing contexts, the highly trust-relevant *Legitimacy Theory* is dominant (e.g., Gibson, Caldeira, & Spence, 2005; Tyler, 2006).

Cross-disciplinary approaches to the study of trust, however, have been limited by a lack of attention to the ways in which context impacts the nature of trusting relationships between individuals and groups. Specifically, research has failed to consider the ways in which the expectations of trustors and trustees differ as one moves from one domain of study to the next. Reflecting recognition of the importance of context, McEvily and Tortoriello (2011) advocated the development of "a generalizable theory of context that explains when and under which conditions different components of trust are more or less relevant" (p. 41). To be sure, previous research has examined impacts of contextual factors on trust. For example, Pirson and Malhotra (2011) examined trust from the perspective of a variety of stakeholders and demonstrated that the dimensions of perceived trustworthiness vary depending on the nature of the stakeholder group examined. Scholars also have conceptually examined the multi-level nature of trust and its impact on the measurement of trust to provide insights into the ways in which trust manifests when examined across multiple levels

of analysis (Currall & Inkpen, 2002). Specifically, in their analysis and review of several studies within the business domain, Currall and Inkpen found that the level of theory and level of measurement were misaligned in several studies. That is, the level of theory was often the trust between firms, but the level of measurement was often between people and firms (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1

	Person as trustor (one individual)	Group as trustor (relatively small set of identifiable people)	Institution as trustor (formal or informal organization, system, or mechanism of social order)
Institution as trustee (formal or informal organization, system, or mechanism of social order)	A person trusting an institution. **Examples**: People's trust in courts; schools; banks; the media; a political party; the military; the education system; the prison system; insurance companies; different levels of government.	A group trusting an institution. **Examples**: An interest group's trust in the legislative branch; a town's elected officials' trust in the National Guard; a group of company managers trusting the company for which they work.	An institution trusting another institution. **Examples**: Corporations trusting banks; banks trusting the Federal Reserve; the executive branch recognizing the legitimacy of and authority of the legislature; the education system trusting in the courts.
Group as trustee (relatively small set of identifiable people)	A person trusting a group. **Examples**: An individual's trust in one's colleagues; trust in one's church leaders; trust in one's family.	A group trusting another group. **Examples**: An association of professionals trusting their leadership committee; the offensive line trusting the defensive line on a particular sports team; inter-firm cooperation and collaboration.	An institution trusting a group. **Examples**: A health maintenance organization's (HMO) trust in a group of healthcare providers; a company trusting its management team; the military trusting its commanders.
Person as trustee (one individual)	A person trusting another person. **Examples**: A person trusting another to honor a contract; a husband trusting his spouse; an employee trusting her manager.	A group trusting a person. **Examples**: A group of managers trusting their corporate attorney; a particular school's parent-teacher association members trusting the school's principal; an interest group trusting a particular politician.	An institution trusting a person. **Examples**: Governmental agencies trusting individuals to contribute to governmental decisions in the context of public participation; the Supreme Court trusting its chief justice; the executive branch trusting the president.

In this chapter, we recognize the multiple levels at which trust might be relevant. Table 7.1, to which we will refer throughout this chapter, illustrates the matrix of trustee-trustor relationships at three broad levels. However, we seek to further illuminate how trust at multiple levels might manifest, by also considering the contextual factors at each level. In particular, we consider trust at the individual, group, and institutional levels, and consider each of these levels in the public and private domains. For example, do the same antecedents of trust in private organizations (e.g., for-profit corporations) also apply to trust in public institutions (e.g., Congress)? Do trustors in private organizations such as corporations have the same expectations about the trustee as trustors who are making trust judgments about a governmental entity such as Congress? How are these dynamics impacted when multiple individuals make up a collective trustor? Or when multiple individuals comprise a collective trustee? Answering such questions will be critical if a multidisciplinary understanding of trust is to emerge. While this chapter is unable to examine all possible contexts in which trust plays a role, we hope that this overview will provide a conceptual foundation to inform future research.

Trust Across Levels of Analysis

We begin with a commonly-accepted cross-domain definition of trust put forth by Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer (1998): "A psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (p. 395). For further discussion of the applicability of this definition of trust across various domains, see Hamm, Lee, Trinkner, Wingrove, Leven, & Breuer (this volume). They analyze trust as a single construct vs. one that is fundamentally different across various domains, including public administration, policing, the courts, and healthcare. For the purposes of the present chapter, we proceed with this definition as relevant for the cross-domain study of trust.

Again, we assert that it is important to consider the cross-level implications of trust. That is, how might trust differ depending on whether the trustors and trustees are a collective rather than individuals? Therefore, rather than utilizing the specific domain (such as policing, healthcare, etc.) to illustrate our framework, we first focus our attention on the level of analysis that is invariant across the numerous domains in which trust is applied in this volume. For instance, the person-to-person level of trust could occur in both the policing and healthcare contexts. Person-to-person trust can be illustrated by one police officer trusting another police officer, or with one physician trusting a nurse. Similarly, trust can be relevant in the group-to-group level by, for example, a particular unit of officers trusting a particular group of police leaders. Institution-to-institution trust can be demonstrated in an interaction where a state-level executive agency interacts with a state-level appellate court. As noted above, previous research has considered such implications in the context of international joint ventures (Currall & Inkpen, 2002). There, the authors theorized about how to measure and conceptualize trust using a 3×3 matrix of individuals, small groups, and firms (see our Table 7.1 for a conceptually similar matrix – ours is not specific to business but rather is intended to be applicable in both public and private domains).

Research has demonstrated that there are differences in the nature of trust depending on the level in which it is measured. For example, interpersonal and interfirm trust differ in important ways in the buyer-seller context, each playing different roles in affecting negotiating processes and exchange performance (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998). To use the benevolence-integrity-ability model to illustrate, negotiations between two individuals may be based on the benevolence and integrity of the trustee, while negotiations between firms may be based more strongly on the ability and integrity of the trustee firm. Further, even while interpersonal trust between individuals in two different firms might be strong, interfirm trust might be relatively weak
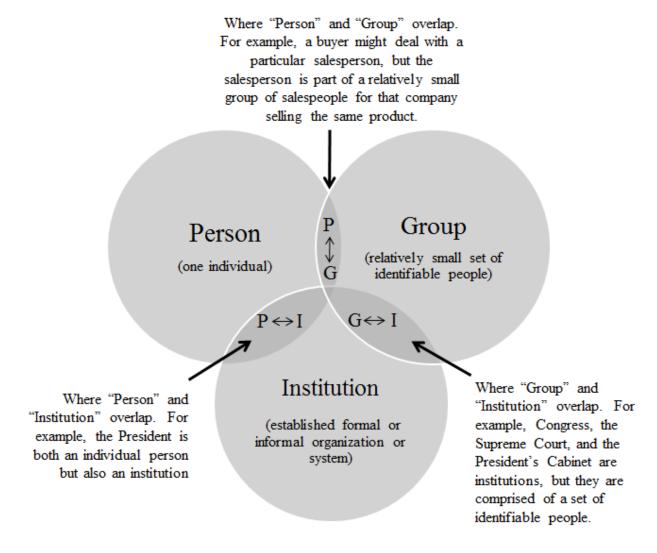
(Barney & Hansen, 1994). These findings only begin to highlight the myriad relationships in which trust might be relevant and how trust might differ across different levels. Additionally, the results suggest a need to explore the ways in which individual- and group-level dynamics impact the conceptualization and measurement of trust.

The context in which individuals, groups, or organizations operate will dictate whether and how individuals, groups, and organizations trust one another. For example, in an organizational setting, employee trust in a supervisor may differ from employee trust in a small work group, or trust in the board of directors. In the realm of government, citizen trust in a particular elected official might differ substantially from citizen trust in the institution of which the elected official is a member. In the U.S. this phenomenon is nicely illustrated as public trust in individual members of Congress is consistently higher than trust in Congress at large, a phenomenon identified by Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (1995), and as discussed by Campos-Castillo et al. (this volume). In this particular situation, it may be possible that interpersonal aspects of trust may be driving trust in individual legislators (i.e., the left-most, bottom box of Table 7.1: person-to-person trust) while something other than interpersonal trust is driving trust in the institution (i.e., one of the other eight boxes in Table 7.1). Studies suggest that measures of confidence in Congressional leaders as individuals or in Congress as an institution as a whole capture different attitudes; the former are better predicted by party identification and ideology, whereas the latter stem more from social status and institutional attachment (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995). As another example of why these various levels may matter, consider that when multiple agencies collaborate to tackle public problems, trust between individuals within agencies (i.e., person-to-person, person-to-institution) may be high, while trust between small groups within each organization (i.e., group-to-group) may simultaneously be low.

To illustrate the measurement implications of the multilevel perspective of trust, it may be

worth considering a number of examples. The Person–Group–Institution distinctions represented in Table 7.1 are not necessarily mutually exclusive, thus adding another layer of complexity to the study of trust from a methodological perspective (see Figure 7.1). This complexity may be evidenced in public opinion polls and surveys that assess trust. For instance, when survey administrators ask respondents about "trust in Congress," some respondents might report their trust in Congress as an institution while others might respond based on their trust in a particular legislator. Likewise, in surveys of employees in organizational settings, assessments of trust may be driven strongly by assessments of supervisor trust for some individuals, but driven by assessments of trust in the larger workgroup or organization for others. Therefore, while a large amount of trust research focuses on elements of interpersonal trust (i.e., trust between individuals), our 3×3 matrix illustrates that *interpersonal* trust is not always relevant. Although aspects of interpersonal trust may be relevant for most of the levels, it is likely not relevant at the "institution-to-institution" level (i.e., the right-most upper box of Table 7.1, and the "institution" area of Figure 7.1 that does not overlap with the "person" or "group" areas). Interpersonal trust is relevant when the trustee is a person trusting another person or trusting a group, because groups are composed of identifiable people – but trust in groups may nevertheless have a different character than person-to-person trust. Interpersonal trust is similarly relevant when the trustee is a group trusting an individual person or another group. However, when an institution is the trustee or trustor, "interpersonal" trust does not fit well conceptually. Other trust-related constructs, such as perceptions of trustee legitimacy, competence, benevolence, shared values, and impartiality may be more important at this level (see Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1

Where "Person" and "Group" overlap. For example, a buyer might deal with a particular salesperson, but the salesperson is part of a relatively small group of salespeople for that company selling the same product.

Person
(one individual)

P
↑
↓
G

Group
(relatively small set of identifiable people)

P ↔ I

G ↔ I

Institution
(established formal or informal organization or system)

Where "Person" and "Institution" overlap. For example, the President is both an individual person but also an institution

Where "Group" and "Institution" overlap. For example, Congress, the Supreme Court, and the President's Cabinet are institutions, but they are comprised of a set of identifiable people.

Let us revisit Rousseau et al.'s (1998) cross-domain definition of trust with the 3×3 matrix of trustee-trustor relationships in mind. The "willingness to accept vulnerability" arguably makes sense for each of these levels, but in different ways. Trust may be best understood in terms of interpersonal vulnerability at the person level and to some degree at the group level. There is choice involved in the willingness to be vulnerable in interpersonal trust. But at the institutional level (where "interpersonal" trust seems ill-fitting), trust is about willingness to cooperate and comply in order to preserve social order. From a Lockean perspective, there is "choice" involved in an abstract sense in

that citizens in democracies give tacit consent to be governed by the constitutional systems, policies, norms, and so forth that have been created over the years.[1] Once trust in such institutions has eroded to the point that citizens no longer feel their liberties are being protected by such institutions, individuals could simply relocate, or attempt to establish a new constitutional order. From a purely theoretical perspective, then, attempting to apply common conceptualizations of trust to the study of trust in public institutions may be problematic. In the next section, we consider some of the distinctions between public and private domains that may inform the conceptualization and measurement of trust.

Trust Across Domains and in Private and Public Contexts

Much of the recent research on trust has originated out of the organizational behavior and management fields. Thus, much of what we know about the dimensions of trust, the impacts of trust on attitudes and behaviors, and the mediating role of trust between attitudes and behaviors has been developed by researchers working in organizational settings (e.g. Kramer, 1999; Mayer et al., 1995) where trustees and trustors are typically involved in an employee–employer relationship.

Trustor–trustee expectations in the employee-employer relationship may be shaped by the norms, customs, and policies that govern behaviors in various settings. For example, the development of trust between two employees who occupy similar places in the hierarchy of a manufacturing firm may be shaped by nature of their employment and the relationship between one another's work. The development of trust between an employee and a supervisor in the same firm may be shaped by role differentials, which might manifest in expectations about the obligations of the employee to meet the needs of the supervisor. Further, employee trust in the "company" or organization may be shaped by the employee's understanding of his or her place in the company hierarchy and shaped by previous experiences with the individuals who comprise the leadership of

the firm. In each of these scenarios, the trustor and trustee understand the roles of each other in the particular workplace context. Moreover, each likely understands the broad legal framework guiding employment which shapes the expectations of individuals and groups across the organizational hierarchy. Simply put, in organizational settings where trustors and trustees are also the employee and employer, each individual and collective has specific rights and obligations that guide behavior.

However, it may be useful to distinguish employment in private settings to employment in public settings. In recent years, a robust literature on public service motivation has emerged (see Perry, 1996). Public service motivation theory holds that individuals pursue providing service in public settings as a result of a number of factors such as: commitment to public interest, civic duty, social justice, self-sacrifice, and compassion (Perry, 1996). At the heart of this theory is a general understanding that individuals who seek employment in public agencies may have a unique set of motivations that are somewhat distinct from their counterparts who seek employment in private, for-profit organizations. In particular, public sector employees may have different reward motivations and may have higher levels of organizational commitment (Crewson, 1997). While relatively little research to date has examined the role of trust in shaping public service motivation, recent studies have suggested that trust may be an important factor of public service motivation. For instance, Chen, Hsieh, and Chen (2014) argues that interpersonal trust between colleagues is an important source of knowledge sharing in public settings, and that public employees' trust in citizens can enhance opportunities for more citizen participation in governmental decision-making. In sum, the lack of a profit motive and perhaps a greater emphasis on democratic norms may lead trust to play a slightly different role in public employment versus private employment settings. Moreover, the unique aspects of public employment may introduce unique trust relationships (i.e. governmental employees trusting citizens) that are not necessarily found in private, for-profit enterprises.

Consequently, the study of trust across public and private employment settings may prove to be a fruitful line of research by allowing scholars to test whether models of trust developed in one domain retain their predictive validity in other domains.

Trust at Multiple Levels in Democratic Contexts

Outside of workplace settings, many of the situational norms, customs, and policies associated with employment disappear, or are replaced by others. This is particularly true as we consider the public realm of democratic societies. Democratic societies provide for varying levels of public input into the decisions made by public officials. To apply Rousseau et al.'s (1998) definition of trust to democratic societies, we can surely see that citizens do accept vulnerability to decision makers on a consistent basis. For example, unlike in many private contexts (e.g. employment, contractual relationships, etc.) in which the trustor may have limited voice—or even a limited expectation of voice—individuals in public settings are often entitled to make their voices heard. In general, citizens in democratic societies can make their voices heard through such methods as voting, participation in interest groups, direct contact of public officials, etc. Indeed, citizens in democratic societies have a wide array of avenues through which to impact the decision making of public officials. Therefore, while vulnerability to decision makers exists for citizens in a democratic society, the level and nature of the vulnerability that individuals or groups might feel is quite different from the vulnerability felt by individuals and groups engaged in at-will employment or business enterprises. In short, citizens in a democratic society have an opportunity to shape the behaviors of the public officials tasked with governing (though, of course, historical and political factors may lead to variation in the extent to which certain citizens believe they have the ability to impact the behaviors of officials).

It is important to recognize that the public sphere is not unidimensional. Within the public

sphere there are multiple institutions, each of which may evoke varying expectations regarding the role between the citizen and the state. To again use the American context as an example, each federal governmental institution was specifically designed to produce different expectations from citizens. Theoretical perspectives put forth in the *Federalist Papers*, outline the ways in which the American founders *intended* governmental institutions and citizens to interact. [2] While we know that many intentions of the founders and the political system they developed were not actually implemented in practice, the *Federalist Papers* provide a useful way for beginning to understand how specific design features of the U.S. Constitution might affect expectations about government performance, much like the design features of a private firm might affect employee or investor expectations about performance.

Regarding the executive branch of the federal government, *Publius* indicates in *Federalist #68* that the presidency should be elected not by the average citizen but by members of the electoral college, a body of citizens separate from, and not beholden to, the general electorate (Hamilton, 1788). Subsequent papers make the case for a vigorous executive that has the power to act unilaterally in some instances, particularly in matters dealing with national security. With regard to federal courts, *Publius* favored an even greater distance between citizens and the government, arguing that judges should be appointed by the president—who is not to be directly elected by citizens—and should hold office while demonstrating good behavior. Even within the legislative branch—the branch closest to the people—*Publius* argued for a clear distinction between the Senate and the House of Representatives: Senators were to be elected by state legislatures while House members were to be directly elected by the public. Across the four most visible federal institutions, then, citizens were originally asked to put their faith in the individuals occupying and institutions governing the presidency, the courts, and the Senate, and were given little recourse in the event that

trust was violated. Only the members of the House of Representatives would be threatened in the case of a breach of trust under the original laws of the U.S. Constitution which allowed for direct election of representatives. While Constitutional amendments and interpretations of laws have altered the original blueprint offered by the drafters of the U.S. Constitution, it is clear that the difference in the nature of governmental entities may generate differences in the expectations of citizens across governmental branches.

To illustrate, consider governmental entities such as legislatures, where expectations about obligations to the institution may be nonexistent given that citizens in many democratic nations are not required to help select legislators, let alone pay attention to their activities. Rather, trust in the institution may be shaped by the democratic expectation that the legislature will more or less act in accordance with the public's will. Here, trust may be developed as citizens observe individual legislators address the needs of the people and perform at their job over time. If trust in legislators deteriorates enough over time, citizens have the ability to vote against the legislators in question; thus, there is a fairly strong incentive for legislators to develop citizens' trust.

Democratic institutions such as judicial and executive branches may foster the development of trust differently than legislative branches given the relative autonomy of these entities. Trial courts—those with which citizens come into contact most often—may have the effect of developing relational trust between citizens and representatives of the court since citizens are likely to have some sort of contact with these courts at some point in their lives (Tyler, 2006). Appellate courts—which are oftentimes appointed positions far removed from citizens—may not have the same impact upon relational aspects of trust, but may instead be judged based on citizens' judgments about past performance and future expectations. And the nation's highest court, the U.S. Supreme Court, is the furthest removed from citizens. Given this distance, considerations of trust in the U.S. Supreme

Court is perhaps most usefully conceptualized as perceptions of "legitimacy" rather than interpersonal trust (see e.g., Gibson, Caldeira, & Baird, 1998).

In the U.S. and other nations with a federal form of government, the relationship between citizens and government is even more complex. Federal forms of government, where multiple layers of government have the authority to carry out specific functions, require that citizens must attend to a variety of governmental actors. In the U.S., for example, this means that citizens have a unique relationship with a federal legislature (House of Representatives and the Senate), a state legislature (in most cases an upper and lower state house), and a local legislature (such as a city council). This multi-layer situation also exists with relation to the executive (e.g., president, governor, and mayor) and the judicial branches (e.g., the U.S. Supreme Court, a state court, and a local district court). To even further complicate matters, trust is implicated in the multitude of bureaucratic agencies such as departments of motor vehicles, environmental quality agencies, and health and human services—typically part of the executive branch of government—that citizens tend to actually interact with on a day-to-day basis.

All told, citizens in nations with a federal form of government will develop a unique trust relationship with each of these governmental entities, some of which they will come into contact and many others that they will not. The variety of governmental institutions in federal republics such as the U.S. dictate that scholars must fully understand the nature and purpose of each institution if true evaluations of trust in such institutions are to be assessed and measured. Furthermore, scholars must critically examine whether specific models of trust that are relevant in one context are general and flexible enough to be applied in other contexts.

Trust at Multiple Levels in Other Non-Governmental Group Contexts

In many democratic societies, voluntary associations provide another common way for

individuals and groups to operate in the public sphere. Voluntary associations—be they professional (e.g. trade associations), civil (e.g. religious organizations), or political (e.g., lobbying groups)—play an integral role in public life. The prevalence and importance of such groups in the U.S. was noted very early in American history by de Tocqueville who traveled extensively throughout the U.S in the early 1830's. In his view, voluntary associations were an essential part of American life that helped extend democracy in important ways (de Tocqueville, 1835/2012). Today, while participation in voluntary associations has declined to a degree (Putnam, 2000), they still play an important role in promoting democratic ideals, providing support for individuals, and pressuring government to adopt certain policies.

In many pluralistic societies, voluntary associations are private in nature, but serve in quasi-public roles. In the U.S., for example, voluntary associations such as the Sierra Club[3] are operated as private, non-profit entities that enjoy preferred government status via the tax code. Such organizations operate as a typical private organization with a hierarchical leadership structure. Consequently, the trust relationship within non-profit organizations is likely to mirror that of many of other private, for-profit entities, where there are typically employee-employer relationships. But the Sierra Club and other non-profits are unique in that they typically have a donor or member network that is not employed by the organization but that provides support by way of financial and other resources. As noted by Olson (1965), interest groups offer selective benefits to members to encourage them to stay active in the organization and to continue to offer support. The presence of donors and outside contributors to non-profits introduces a novel trust relationship between individual donors and the organization as a collective. In general, organizations trust individual members to continue to donate resources, while individual members trust the organization to provide meaningful networking and recreational opportunities. The exchange of selective benefits for the

promise of donations serves as a contractual aspect to the relationship.

In addition to serving as an expressive outlet for members, interest groups engage in lobbying activities to pressure government regulators to adopt policies that are beneficial to the environment, in the views of the organization. Again, individual members trust the organization to lobby governments and pursue policies that are consistent with the aims and goals of the organization and its members. In pressuring the government to take particular actions and by helping to develop public policy, the Sierra Club, for example, takes part in an advocacy coalition (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988) of multiple lobbying groups that are interested in environmental issues including industry and trade groups, governmental actors, and the media. As such, the lobbying efforts implicate many aspects of trust that are studied in strategic management, particularly in inter-firm cooperation (Schilke & Cook, 2015). Coalitions of interest groups pursuing the same policy goals must cooperate at the individual and organizational levels, and key individuals within co-aligned organizations must have some level of interpersonal trust in order to coordinate activities. Further, the broader organizations (that take the form of a collective of individuals) must have some level of trust in order to pursue common policy goals. The same is true of trade and lobbying groups that work closely with government. In order to develop policy, trade and lobbying organizations must also work together to meet goals and objectives. Again, this implicates various facets of interpersonal and interorganizational trust between for-profit organizations, non-profit organizations, and various levels and branches of government.

Discussion

Thus far, we have outlined the multi-level and contextual factors that impact the study of trust in various settings. While the examples provided here touch on only a few of the myriad settings and situations in which trust is an important factor in interpersonal and interorganizational

relations, the examples illustrate the many considerations that researchers must make when taking a cross-contextual and multiple-level view of trust.

Previous research has shown that the dynamics of interpersonal trust and interorganizational or group-level trust are related but distinct constructs (e.g., Barney & Hansen, 1994; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Zaheer et al., 1998). Similarly, recent neuroscience research has demonstrated that the neural correlates of judgments about companies are somewhat different that those that underlie interpersonal judgments about people (Plitt, Savjani, & Eagleman, 2014). Despite the fledgling literature about the potentially important distinctions between the nature of trust at these different levels of analysis, Currall and Inkpen (2002) found that many studies of trust poorly theorize about and account for level of analysis in their measurements. The published studies they reviewed often theorized about the nature of trust in inter-group or inter-institutional levels, but measured trust at interpersonal levels. Although this finding might be cause for concern, other research suggests that separating perceptions of an institution from the individuals in the institution may not be very easy to do or even desirable as they may overlap considerably (see e.g., Colquitt et al., 2013).

Let's consider a simple example of how a cross-level understanding of trust is important. If the different levels of trust are important to the study of trust, the pronouns or instructions used to measure trust may matter. If trustors are asked to rate their trust in an institution with unclear pronouns or instructions, they may consider the entity itself *or* they may consider the people that comprise the institution – thus, the resulting measurements might not be consistently conceptualized by the respondents with an associated increase in measurement error. As one particular demonstration, people might be asked to rate how "caring" an institution is, such as the Federal Reserve. It might make a difference if people considers how the institution balances shareholder earnings vs. low interest rates to help the average consumer (i.e., an institution-level performance

indicator of "care") compared to if the trustor instead considered how warm and caring vs. cold and uncaring they found the new head of the reserve, Janet Yellen (i.e., more of an interpersonal-level indicator of trust) in making their rating. If the pronouns used in the measurement items or if the instructions were clear about the level the respondent should rate (entity vs. person), the error associated with the measurement might decrease.

Additionally, the theoretical and empirical models used to measure trust must be carefully scrutinized before being used to conceptualize and measure trust across various settings. For instance, the benevolence-integrity-ability model of trust (Mayer et al., 1995) has been shown to have predictive ability in a variety of organizational settings (Aubert & Kelsey, 2003; Bhattacherjee, 2002). The benevolence-integrity-ability model of trust may also have utility in developing models of trust in governmental institutions. However, before applying such a model of trust to the study of the U.S. Supreme Court, for example, researchers should consider the theoretical rationale for the organization of the Supreme Court, the resulting organizational features of the court, as well as the public's understanding of the court that results from political socialization. Such a consideration may reveal that that the benevolence-integrity-ability model may not be appropriate, or that specific factors of the model—such as the integrity of the Supreme Court—are relevant to the study of the Supreme Court, while the others are not.

Given these discrepant empirical findings in the literature about the similarities vs. differences in trust at these different levels (interpersonal, intergroup, inter-institutional) reviewed above, combined with the *theoretically* meaningful differences, we end this chapter with a call for further attention by trust researchers about whether and how the level of the trusting relationship affects the nature and measurement of trust. Ultimately, such attention may inform whether a singular model of trust can be applied at different levels and across public and private contexts, or

whether the interactions between levels and situations yield such varied contexts, that a single model

of trust is not feasible or appropriate for all settings.

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Table and Figure Captions

Table 7.1. Trustee-trustor matrix at three levels.

Figure 7.1. Overlapping elements of multilevel trust.

Notes

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[1] While the emphasis of this exercise is on democratic societies, we recognize that in many societies throughout the world vulnerability to an authority may be compulsory rather than voluntary.

[2] The Federalist Papers were a series of 85 essays written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay in 1787 and 1788. The essays originally appeared anonymously in New York newspapers under the pen name "Publius." The purpose of the papers was to urge the citizens of New York to ratify the new U.S. Constitution. They are considered a primary important source for understanding the original intent of the Constitution (Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/federalist.html).

[3] An environmental protection group dedicated to conserving and protecting wilderness areas, improving air and water quality, energy conservation, and protecting endangered species, http://www.sierraclub.org/about.