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Trust Differences Between Blacks and Whites In An Organizational Setting

by Dow Scott

As increased numbers of blacks enter jobs from which they were formerly excluded, concerns about whether they can perform the work and interact successfully with peers, subordinates, and superiors have been expressed [18]. This study examines a large organization that has been racially mixed through top management for over ten years. The author identifies trust as one critical element of successful management and examines trust differences between black and white exempt employees (supervisors, managers and professionals) toward superiors, peers, and top management.

DEFINITION OF TRUST

Although variation in the definition of trust exists, Griffin's trust definition is succinct and captures the essence of trust:

It is the reliance upon the characteristics of an object, or the occurrence of an event, or the behavior of a person in order to achieve a desired but uncertain objective in a risky situation. [11, p. 105]

Trust, then, can be characterized as a positive force from which cooperation is derived, whereas mistrust is characterized as the unwillingness of individuals to take cooperative action that increases their vulnerability. Individuals who are mistrustful are reluctant to sacrifice their opinions, ideas, and efforts because of possible negative outcomes [10].

Interpersonal trust has been found to have a powerful influence on human behavior [26, 28]. Extensive research in education, psychology, counseling, criminology, and communications identifies interpersonal trust as the key ingredient of cooperative relationships. In a management context, trust is a necessary element for open, accurate communications [20]; trust influences the effectiveness of group problem-solving and decision-making [39, 9]; it influences people's attitudes and feeling about the organizations and their jobs [5]; and it determines the methods management

will use to control employee behavior [10]. Patten [23] considers trust necessary for the installation of a Management by Objectives program, and, indeed, Scott [30] finds empirical support for this position. Furthermore, the formation of trust is often the focus of organizational development efforts because high levels of trust are seen as linked with efficient work group functioning, long-term organizational effectiveness, and the willingness of people to make adaptations to environmental change [17, 7]. Trust also affects one's willingness to share meaningful information, one's commitment to take action, and one's satisfaction in relationships with other persons [10]. As such, trust can be considered a critical element of successful management, and thus, in racially mixed organizations, the influence of race on trust would be of substantial interest.

ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BLACKS AND WHITES

Research has shown that basic attitudinal differences exist between blacks and whites. These differences have been attributed to discrimination, culture, economic levels, and education [16, 35]. More specific to this research, Switken and Gynther [33] have found that black college students have significantly lower trust scores on Rotter's Interpersonal Trust Scale than do white college students. Wrightsman [38] and Claxton [3] have also found that blacks indicate lower levels of trust than do whites on the trust scale of the Philosophies of Human Nature instrument, but these differences are not always significant. However, both the Interpersonal Trust Scale and Philosophies of Human Nature instrument measure trust in the abstract. Participants are asked to respond to items about the general nature of people or roles and not about specific persons with whom they interact. When Johnson [15] substituted "most negroes or whites" for "most people" in the general directions of the Philosophy of Human

Nature instrument, he found that members of each racial group trust members of their own group more than members of the other group.

The influences of race on employee attitudes has also been explored through the examination of superior-subordinate relationships. King and Bass [18] predict that leader behavior will differ when a white supervises white subordinates, when a black supervises blacks, when a black supervises whites, and when a white supervises blacks. King and Bass [18] have hypothesized that black superiors or predominantly black subordinates would have a difficult time establishing trust relationships because subordinates would tend to see them as co-opted by the white power structure. In the situation where a black supervises predominantly white subordinates, the supervisor would exercise general rather than close supervision and would encourage subordinates to initiate interactions. King and Bass base this prediction on the assumption that black supervisors would "attempt to minimize any feelings of status incongruity on the part of white subordinates by making their supervisory status less conspicuous" [18, p. 255]. In the situation where whites supervise predominantly black subordinates, white supervisors would be uneasy in their position because of the changing roles of blacks in society. Furthermore, black subordinates would be unwilling to discuss personal problems because the white supervisor would be perceived as lacking knowledge about and empathy with black values. Based on the descriptions of interpersonal relationship outlined by King and Bass [18], trust levels would differ significantly between the racial combinations. Arranged from high to low, the combinations would be as follows: 1) white superior supervising a white subordinate, 2) black superior/white subordinate, 3) black superior/black subordinate, and 4) white superior/black subordinate.

Although King and Bass [18] present persuasive arguments that the race of subordinates and supervisors will affect leadership behavior, the empirical evidence is mixed. Allen and Ruhe [1], Hill and Hughes [12], and Hill and Ruhe [13] concluded that there were few differences in the behavior of black and white leaders. Yet Richards and Jaffee [24] and Fenelon and Magargee [6] found significant leadership differences between races. These studies are laboratory type research subject to certain inherent weaknesses such as the transitory nature of the research settings, the tasks performed, and use of college students as experimental subjects.

Parker's [22] research represents one of the few studies that examined supervisory behavior in an actual industrial situation. Black foremen were found to have higher scores for managerial support, goal emphasis, and work facilitation. The race of subordinates and the racial composition of work groups were also considered critical variables in subordinate-supervisor relationships.

Although trust differences between blacks and whites are believed to exist, the influence that the race of an

employee and/or a superior will have on trust has not been clearly established. Switkin and Gynther [33], Wrightsman [38], and Claxton [3] suggested that blacks had lower trust levels than whites. However, when Johnson [15] had specified the race of trust object (authority figures), he found that authority figures of the same race were trusted more than authority figures of the opposite race. Thus, the findings of previous studies may have simply indicated that when the race of the authority figures are not specified they are assumed to be whites (which was most often a reality in the U.S. where these studies were conducted). This interpretation of the empirical findings is congruent with the notion that trust is based on the perceived predictability and positive intent of "other" assuming cultural difference and limited social contact between the races. As a result, one would hypothesize that employees will indicate higher levels of trust toward superiors and top management of the same race than superiors and top management of the opposite race.

King and Bass [18] hypothesize a more complex interpersonal relationship between blacks and whites in a superior/subordinate relationship. Because of past cultural expectations and the dominance of whites in power positions, blacks and whites will behave differently in leadership positions, and their behavior will be perceived differently by subordinates. Upon examining these statements concerning the superior/subordinate relationship, one would hypothesize that whites will have more trust in their superiors than blacks regardless of the race of those superiors.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The data were collected in a large transportation department that serves a major metropolitan area. Although the department is responsible for all public transportation within the city, its primary focus is on the bus system. The department has approximately 2,200 employees and 160 are exempt (as defined by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938), which includes managers, professionals, and supervisors. Promotion from within has been the traditional policy except for the director and assistant director, who are appointed by the mayor. The organization is racially mixed, with blacks constituting 55 percent of the exempt employees and whites constituting the remaining 45 percent.

Inherent in this type of research is the possibility that some factor other than race could cause trust differences between the black and white respondents. However, the research site provided some natural controls that reduce this possibility. First, the organization moderates the individual income factor. Because blacks and whites are employed at all levels of the organization and have been employed at these levels for a considerable time, average pay levels do not differ as a matter of organization policy between black and white respondents. Furthermore, all employees are urban dwellers because they must live within a city

(totally urbanized) to be employed by the department. Although one cannot assume that blacks and whites interact socially as much as they do with people from their own racial groups, integration of neighborhoods in the city and employment in a racially mixed organization have facilitated social contact.

Age, education level, and gender are other factors that could conceivably cause trust levels to vary. However, only a slight difference in the age of blacks ($x=46$) and whites ($x=47$) exist. Although the researcher could not obtain respondent educational levels, there are probably only small differences between the two groups because high school diplomas are required to obtain entry level jobs and getting additional education has not been encouraged. Because very few women ($n=3$) hold positions other than clerical ones, they were excluded from the analysis to prevent any uncontrolled influence based on gender.

Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed to the 160 exempt employees, which included all supervisors, managers, and professionals. Of the 155 questionnaires returned, 125 responses (78%) were usable in this analysis. Thirty cases were dropped because the respondents either did not indicate their own race or did not identify their supervisor because they were afraid that their response to the questionnaire might become known. However, there were very few respondents ($n=7$) in this category (in fact, too few to test for significant differences).

The data were obtained from a longitudinal study that examined the influence of trust on the assessed value of a management program implemented in the department. Data collected prior to and after the program implementation indicated that trust in superiors, work groups, and top management were strongly correlated: $r = .423$, $r = .335$, and $r = .355$, respectively.

Trust Measures

In this study, what could be termed self report situational measures of trust were used. Typically, trust has been measured either by the trusting behaviors exhibited or by self report questionnaires. The questionnaires were chosen because of the difficulties in obtaining behavioral measures in the field. The basic distinction between questionnaires is in the focus of the measure. Rotter (International Trust Scale) and Wrightsman (Philosophies of Human Nature Scale) measure trust in terms of the individual's feelings of trust toward significant but unspecified others, e.g., teachers, parents, politicians, the press, etc. These items are added to produce what could be termed a generalized measure of trust. The other type of questionnaires focus on the situation in which trust is of interest. For example, if employee trust in management is of interest, then the trust scale requests the respondent to answer questions about his perceived trust in

management. Questionnaires referring to a specific situation were chosen because they were found to be a stronger predictor of behavior than the "generalized other" questionnaire method of measuring trust [29].

The measures in this study examined the participants' perceptions of trust in his/her superior, trust in work group, and trust in top management. Because previously designed scales did not provide trust measures of the persons of interest in the employment relationship, these trust scales were especially designed for this study. However, other trust questionnaires were examined so the items could be framed in the conventional terms used to measure trust [19, 25, 7, 11]. The following 5 point Likert-type items are illustrative of the items selected for the study: "I feel free to discuss work problems with my immediate supervisor without fear of having it used against me later"; "I have complete trust that members of my work-group will treat me fairly"; and "Management seldom follows through with what they say they are going to do." These items were scaled strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree.

The trust scales used in this study were selected from a larger bank of trust items and then tested in a pilot study. Although the statistical factor loading was considered, content of the item was also a major determinant as to whether an item in a particular scale was retained. The reduction in the number of items from 25 to 13 reduced the alpha coefficients by less than .3% on any one scale. Finally, as would be predicted in the literature, the trust in superior and trust in management scales were found to have a positive significant ($p < .001$) relationship to participation in decision-making [27, 39, 14] and job satisfaction [5]. Significant trust differences between men and women were also found when this instrument was administered in another organization [32]. These findings provide support for the predictive validity of the trust measures. A more detailed discussion of scale development and psychometric properties can be found in Scott [32].

Analysis

A one way analysis of variance was used to determine whether significant differences exist between black and white trust in work group and top management where only the race of the respondent is known. A two-way Analysis of Variance and a Duncan Multiple Range Test were used to analyze trust differences between four racial combinations in the superior-subordinate relationship: blacks supervising blacks, whites supervising whites, blacks supervising whites, and whites supervising blacks. Although both tests should indicate what influence race of the respondent and superior have on the trust score, the Duncan Multiple Range Test can be argued to be a more appropriate test because it is affected less by the unequal cell size. Furthermore, Duncan's test can identify the particular relationship that created the differential effect.

RESULTS

First the psychometric properties of the measures were examined. The intercorrelations between the trust measures are .525 (superior x work group), .443 (superior x top management), and .374 (work group x top management). The coefficient alphas for each measure are greater than .87. This is evidence that construct validity exists for these scales because the interscale correlations are substantially less than the coefficient alpha [21]. The results of the factor analysis (orthogonal rotation: varimax) that appear in Table 1 are consistent with theoretical assignment of items to scales. As the factor analytic results indicate, three factors emerge with an eigenvalue of 1.00 or greater. Factors I, II, and III, which represent trust in superior, work group, and top management, respectively, have factor loadings that are all quite high, ranging from .534 to .921, except for item 3 on the top management trust scale. Although item 3 had only a .379 factor loading, the item is retained because the content clearly referred to management trust.

TABLE 1
FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS OF TRUST MEASURES
(Varimax Rotation)

Factor Name	Items	Factor I	Factor II	Factor III	Factor IV	n
Superior Trust	1	.812	.158	.243	.121	.756
	2	.842	.300	.304	.024	.830
	3	.534	.264	.214	.290	.484
	4	.848	.219	.082	-.071	.779
	5	.760	.259	.173	-.205	.716
Work Group	1	.283	.748	.168	.031	.669
	2	.196	.715	.154	.137	.523
	3	.202	.837	.170	-.098	.779
	4	.170	.635	.144	-.048	.455
Management Trust	1	.155	.098	.921	-.051	.844
	2	.179	.170	.864	.148	.829
	3	.240	.232	.379	-.197	.293
	4	.193	.217	.628	.007	.478
Eigenvalue*		5.70767	1.42312	1.23961	0.23964	
Variance Explained		38.2	30.3	28.7	2.8	

*Values obtained before rotation

A one way analysis of variance was utilized to examine the trust differences between black and white respondents toward their work group and top management. Because these trust measures focused on a group of individuals who could be either black or white, it was not possible to control for the race of trust object. Trust differences between blacks and whites toward their work group was not found to be significant ($p < .30$; means = 3.46 and 3.41, respectively). However, blacks indicated significantly ($p < .01$) higher levels of trust in management than did whites (means = 3.45 and 3.08, respectively).

A two way analysis of variance was utilized to examine respondent trust to their superiors when the race of both were known (shown in Table 2). Significant trust differences were not found based on either the race of the respondent or superior (main effects). Furthermore, the interaction between the race of the respondent and the race of the superior did not reveal

any significant trust differences.

TABLE 2
BLACK-WHITE TRUST DIFFERENCES TOWARD PEERS:
A ONE-WAY ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE^a

Source	DF	Mean Square	F Value	P > F
Between Groups	1	7169.39	1.09	.30
Within Groups	130	6562.24		
TOTAL	131			

^acorrected for unequal cell size

By categorizing the data in the four black-white groupings, the mean scores for this data are quite similar for blacks supervised by blacks ($n = 43$, mean = 3.99), whites supervised by whites ($n = 31$, mean = 3.93), and whites supervised by blacks ($n = 23$, mean = 3.96). However, where blacks report to white superiors, trust levels are lower ($n = 28$, mean = 3.46) than in the other reporting relationships. A Duncan Multiple Range Test indicates that there is a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the mean scores and that the difference can be attributed to the low trust condition of blacks reporting to white superiors.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that theory provides an inadequate explanation of the effect of race on trust levels within organizations. First, black trust levels are higher for each of the three measures than those of whites and significantly so in respect to trust in management. This finding is inconsistent with Rotter's and Wrightsman's general findings that blacks have lower levels of trust than do whites. However, this study is more consistent with Johnson's [15] contention that the race of authority figures has important influence on trust. Top management in both the transportation department and the city are dominated by blacks in this research location. Second, King and Bass's hypotheses that seem to indicate that trust levels will be higher for whites than blacks regardless of the race of the supervisor were not supported.

When the data from the trust in supervisor measure were analyzed in terms of race of the respondent and superior, trust differences were not found between 3 of the 4 racial combinations. Only where blacks reported to whites were trust levels significantly lower. Thus, to integrate the findings of this study and other empirical research, a reformulation of theory is required. It is proposed that interaction theory be considered as one interpretation of the influence of race on employee attitudes.

Numerous studies have documented the fact that interaction and proximity increase positive attitudes toward other persons [8, 2, 37]. In fact, Taylor [34]

argues that interaction will break down prejudices between blacks and whites. Because substantial interaction is likely between superiors and subordinates and within the work group (peers), significant trust differences would not be predicted between blacks and whites. However, where interaction is more limited, as between the participants in the study and top management, race would still influence trust levels, as found by Johnson [15], who utilized a generalized trust measure for each racial group.

The distrust of whites in positions of authority may have become a norm in black culture, and this norm may be so strong that, even with interaction, the black subordinates will be unwilling to change their preconceived notions about whites. This interpretation is plausible when the setting of the study is considered. The transportation department is part of city government where only recently a black mayor was elected, and some departments in the city have only recently been integrated. Black city employees express considerable pride in managing the city and express negative attitudes about whites who still hold managerial positions.

Several implications can be drawn from this research. First, the data conflicts with our theoretical notions concerning the effects of race in the employment situation. We need to reformulate our theories and test them in the context of ongoing work organizations. Second, it suggests that managers are probably rightfully concerned about blacks entering the managerial ranks but that concern may be misplaced. Rather than worry about how white subordinates may respond to black superiors, we probably need to look at how blacks relate to white superiors. Where situations like this exist, management would be advised to develop strategies that will enhance trust. Programs that are believed to increase trust include sensitivity training groups, team building, and other training situations where blacks and whites get a chance to interact in a safe environment. Finally, this study provides support for utilizing situational trust measures. Although the three measures were significantly correlated, these measures were not uniformly related to the race of an employee. Because trust is often referred to as an important ingredient of successful management, the measures reported here can be used as tools to monitor organizational trust.

It should be recognized that the applicability of these findings is affected by the field location. Because the data were collected from only one organization, it must be realized that the industry, the inner city location, the exclusion of women from the analysis, and the other factors that made this organization unique could have affected the relationships that were discovered. Only replication in diverse organizations can determine whether the effects are consistent in other situations or whether moderating factors exist.

In conclusion, this empirical investigation of trust between blacks and whites in the employment situation was facilitated by an organizational setting where blacks and whites have work together as equals. It has provided the opportunity to examine the influence of race on trust where black and white relationships are stable and in nearly equal numbers at all organizational levels. Although limitations certainly exist, this research indicates that theorists and practicing managers should reexamine their notions about the effects of race in work organizations.

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