Experiences of trust and distrust in intercultural encounters

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Abstract

Objectives. This study focuses on narrated experiences of trust and distrust of 6 immigrants. It seeks to understand the participants' viewpoints on how intercultural communication creates trust and mistrust.

Material and methods. Between March 2013 and December 2013 I conducted qualitative interviews, face-to-face and through email, with 6 Romanians living in the U.S. The initial interviews lasted half an hour. Follow-up questions, additional interviews, and observations over a period of 6 months provided a fuller picture of the participants' views on trust and mistrust. The interview was semi-structured. The common questions asked of all participants were demographic background questions and open-ended questions, such as: How did you get to trust people from different ethnic backgrounds? All the other questions flowed naturally from the discussion during the interview.

Results. Several themes emerged from the participants' narratives: trust as an inner experience, trust as a commodity, and trust as a socially acceptable image. The results are interpreted through the lenses of intercultural communication concepts: individualism-collectivism, high-context - low-context cultures, ethnocentrism, stranger, and acculturation.

Conclusions. This study is a qualitative attempt at understanding the inner and communicated experiences of trust when we interact with dissimilar others. It adds to the literature of trust and intercultural communication by showing that trust is a socially constructed experience, whose interpretation can be changed by communication. Future studies should continue to explore the experiences of immigrants and the interplay of trust and mistrust in communication with the host countries at the group and/or family level.

Key words: trust, mistrust, immigrants, intercultural communication.

Introduction

Trust has been conceptualized mainly as a process that develops over time (Blau, 1964; Zand, 1972; Rempel, Holmes, and Zana, 1985;). Scholars have identified the willingness to take risk as a main characteristic of any form of trust (Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer, 1996). Very few attempts have been made to find what behaviors are intrinsically associated with trusting beliefs. In the current study, we propose that two behaviors are indicators of trust: knowledge sharing and suspending judgment. McEvily, Perrone, and Zaheer (2003) argued that knowledge sharing, suspending judgment, and safeguarding are processes directly influenced by trust, which they defined as an organizing principle. They demonstrated that trust encourages knowledge sharing and suspending judgment, and discourages safeguarding in organizations in which trust acts as a principle.

Knowledge sharing refers to group members' disclosure of "sensitive and proprietary details about themselves, others," and their work (McEvily, et al., 2003, p. 97). McEvily, et al. (2003) suggested that knowledge sharing is the closest indicator of trust in work groups. Free exchange of knowledge cannot occur when one party is unsure about the other's behavior (Jones and George, 1998). In a group without trust, people will refrain from sharing knowledge because they are unsure about how the others will use their knowledge and because possessing some sort of knowledge is also a source of power (Fama and Jensen, 1983).

McEvily, et al. (2003) defined suspending judgment as a process of "adopting an orientation toward another actor that assumes the other party's intentions and motives are benevolent, or at least benign" (p. 98). Behaviorally, suspending judgment manifests itself as sharing responsibility for important tasks and an absence of monitoring or controlling conversations.

Several research studies show support for an association between trust and suspending judgment. Benton, et al. (1969) and Roberts and O'Reilly (1974) found that lower levels of trust were associated with suspiciousness towards the information, whereas high levels of trust were associated with acceptance of information. Another study by Kramer (1994) supported the assumption that, when people safeguard too much (i.e., they feel overly self-conscious or under scrutiny), they tend to make negative attributions about the others, similar to an attribution error. This, in turn, fosters a pattern of heightened distrust and suspicion regarding others' motives and intentions. In this case, people cannot suspend their judgment because they are not willing to take any risk.

The word metacommunication refers to communication about previous conversations. Although the word "trust" is part of everyday conversations and seems to be included in everybody's vocabulary, learning to develop trust happens in our first years of life. According to Erikson's stages of development, an infant's window for developing basic trust is between birth and 18 months. At this stage, trust develops mostly nonverbally, through visual contact and touch. If properly cared for and handled, the infant will develop optimism, trust, and security. The communication about trust appears later, as in parents' encouraging statements "I trust you to play nice with your friend" or "I trust you to do what I say." These statements may or may not express the state of trust that the parent is feeling at that very moment. If we accept the definition of trust as being knowledge sharing, suspending judgment, and communicating enthusiasm (Popa, 2005), then using the words "I trust you" is not indicative of the actual state of trust. The situation may differ when people use the words to talk about their trust in somebody else: "I trust him/her/them" may actually indicate the state of trust that a person believes or feels he or she has toward another individual(s). The research question that I proposed in this study aims to address this difference: How does metacommunication about trust differ from the narrated experience of trust? I am interested in finding out if there is a disconnect between what people say ("I trust him/her/them") and their actual trusting behaviors (knowledge sharing, suspending judgment, and communicating enthusiasm), as they show in their narratives.

Factors influencing trust

In intercultural relationships, there are other factors that may influence the development of trust, besides the ones involved in same-culture relationships. Cultural values shape people's beliefs and attitudes and their propensity to judge others as trustworthy or untrustworthy. Individualism-collectivism (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) and high-context/low-context (Hall, 1976) seem more relevant to the development of trust.

According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), individualism manifests in societies with loose ties between individuals, whereas collectivism manifests in societies "in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioned loyalty." (p. 76). On a scale from 0 (the most collectivistic) to 100 (the most individualistic), Romania scored 30 and the U.S. scored 91 (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). The work goals represented by the individualism are: personal time, freedom, and challenge, whereas the work goals represented by the collectivism are: training, physical conditions, and the use of skills.

The majority of studies conducted on individualism and collectivism investigate work relationships, since Hofstede's original study was conducted on IBM employees. However, in recent years, researchers started to look at personal relationships through the lens of cultural dimensions, too (see especially the literature on Chinese, Japanese, and Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans). With the exception of the World Value Survey studies on business relationships (management, advertising), very few studies used the cultural dimensions to shed light on the communication styles of Romanians and other Eastern Europeans.

The concept of context was introduced by Edward Hall (1976). Although this concept has lost some appeal in recent years, Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon (2011) argue that, according to their systematic review of studies using Hall's concept, this is due to a dubious classification attached to the concept. Edward Hall distinguished between high-context cultures and low context cultures. In high-context communication, little is to be said in words, because much of the meaning of the message is in the context of the relationship history, tone of voice, gestures, postures, and even status. High-context communication tends to be more formal and more indirect. In a study of 234 IT professionals, Holtbrugge, Weldon and Rogers (2012) found support for the hypothesis that in high-context cultures email messages tend to be more formal. Flowery language, elaborate apologies, and humility are typical for this type of communication. Words are not so important and, sometimes, their literal meanings are expected to be ignored. In those cases, they are simply vehicles for emotional meanings. Developing trust is an important step of every meaningful communication. This type of communication is characteristic to collectivistic cultures. In several studies, Romania was classified as high-context culture (Van Everdingen & Waarts, 2003; Kittler, 2008). In low-context communication, most of the meaning has to be made explicit in words. Many things that in collectivistic cultures are self-evident must be said explicitly in individualistic cultures. Discussions are expected to be straightforward, concise, and efficient, and they usually end with actions. Words are expected to be precise and are meant to be taken literally. This creates a potential disconnect between a person from a high-context and a person from a low-context culture: one of them expects the other to ignore the literal meaning of a word and look for the emotional meaning, while the other may be hurt or offended by the strong words that have been said. The reverse is possible too: while one person may ignore the meaning of a word that was said and understand the emotional meaning, the second person may not be ready to self-disclose deeply, at a deep emotional level, and may want to be taken literally.

I chose the intercultural relationships because of the more obvious role that trust has in this type of relationships. In trying to understand an issue as complex as trust (and communication about trust) in intercultural encounters, we need to describe the factors that shape an immigrant experience, such as: the concept of stranger, ethnocentrism, and culture shock and acculturation.

In intercultural communication, the parties perceive each other to be, at the core, "strangers" (Wolff, 1950). According to Simmel (as cited in Wolff, 1950), a stranger is "near and far" (p. 408) and strangers "are not really conceived as individuals" (p. 408). Even though an immigrant is established in a place for years (sometimes for a longer time than the local), he or she

is still asked the same question: "Where are you from?", which is the most basic move to overcome uncertainty and anxiety produced by someone unalike. When we communicate with strangers, we tend to "fill in the blank" reasons for unknown behaviors because of the human tendency to reduce uncertainty. For instance, we may attribute an internal cause such as laziness to a stranger who works slower than we are used to. The attribution of stranger and the feeling of mistrust associated with it can stay the same or change throughout the relationship. While anthropologists and intercultural researchers tell us that every ethnic group has attributions of strangers, the communication with them and about them is cultural and it varies, according to the level of ethnocentrism specific to each culture.

   Originally a sociological construct, ethnocentrism was appropriated by psychology as an individual's tendency to identify with his or her own group and reject out-groups. Some scholars refer to ethnocentrism as "tunnel vision", "defined as "the narrowness of viewpoint resulting from concentration on a single idea, opinion, to the exclusion of others. Highly ethnocentric individuals believe that their judgment reflects the universal truth of what is normal, right and desirable. The system of beliefs and values of their in-group are regarded as of supreme importance. They perceive the in-group's symbols and values as a source of pride, often despising the other's values (Luque-Martinez et al., 2000). According to Wood (2009), "ethnocentrism leads to judgments that difference is not just different, but wrong" (p.173) (Pocovnicu and Vasilache, 2012, p. 479).

   Neulip and McCroskey (1997) argue that ethnocentrism is a major factor that influences intercultural encounters. They maintain that a high level of ethnocentrism can increase the relational tension between individuals. Lin, Rancer, and Trimbitas (2005) tested the hypothesis that "Romanian students will have significantly higher scores on ethnocentrism than US American students" (p. 142) on a sample of 110 Romanian students from Romania (19-34 years old) and 151 American students from the U.S. (18-47 years old). Their hypothesis was supported, showing that Romanian students living in Romania have a tendency to be more ethnocentric than the American students living in the U.S. The authors explain the findings in part by the cultural propaganda carried on in the communist Romania before 1989, which always showed Romanians as victors in battles, and denigrated other ethnic groups, portraying them as weak, naïve, or evil. It is not a leap of faith to assume that the indoctrination has had a lasting effect, even on Romanians who left the country after 1989. This effect can be observed in their trust of other ethnicities.

   When immigrants move to a different culture, they face numerous personal and professional challenges because of the language, values, norms, and ways of relating. The process of adaptation involves many losses, including financial ones. However, most importantly for the purpose of this paper, are the cultural losses that affect the development of trust. These are part of the process of acculturation. Intercultural researchers tell us that individuals adjust differently to minimize the conflict between their home culture's values and norms and their host culture's values and norms. They may either separate (stay in contact only with ethnically similar others), assimilate (become more like the people in the host culture), integrate (appropriate elements of the host culture and harmonize them with their home culture's values and norms), or become marginalized (avoid contact with both home and host cultures). Trust in dissimilar others happens mostly in the assimilation and integration version of the acculturation process. In both assimilation and integration, immigrants become involved with the local life.

   The general trust in Americans can be shown in the level of involvement with local organizations. Logically, the more involved an immigrant is with local organizations, the better adapted he or she is. However, this may depend on other cultural factors, such as the level of involvement in the country of origin. In a study on immigrants' civic participation in Spain, Voicu and Rusu (2012) showed that immigrants coming from post-communist countries such as Romania,

Bulgaria, and Moldova, showed very little involvement in civic associations. Their data, collected from the Spanish National Immigrant Survey carried out in 2007 on 8575 immigrants from 34 countries of origin, showed that language skills, income levels, and the size of the ethnic group in the host country positively influenced civic participation.

The literature on intercultural communication and on trust in personal relationship can be greatly informed by an in-depth look at how communication about trust is constructed in intercultural encounters. With trust having numerous definitions, it seems like everything there is to say about it has been said already. However, there is almost an elusive quality of trust. When asked about it, people don't necessarily feel it. When they feel it, there are no researchers handy to ask about it. By approaching the topic in an indirect manner, with a focus on how we talk about trust, we may have a chance to make the concept easier to comprehend.

Material and methods

I used the narrative method to collect and analyze individual stories of six immigrants. In order to protect the informants' privacy, I refer to them as informant A, B, C, D, E, and F. They range in age from 39 to 60 years old. Informants A, C, and F are females and informants B, D, and E are males. All but informant D are married to Romanians. All but informants C and D live in the US. C lives in Sweden and D lives in Ireland. Individuals' stories need to be told to gain personal experience about the research problem. The purpose of this narrative study is to understand the experiences of those individuals living among culturally dissimilar others and how they use communication to create trusting or distrusting relationships. At this stage in the research, the trusting relationship is defined as a relationship in which individuals perceive that they disclose openly and suspend judgment about the other person and that the other person discloses openly and suspends judgment about them. A distrusting relationship is defined as one in which individuals perceive that they withhold information from another person and they judge another person and that the other person withholds information from them and judges them. At this point in the research, my working question is: What are the communication experiences of trust and mistrust in intercultural encounters?

I chose the intercultural relationships because of the more obvious role that trust has in this type of relationships. In intercultural communication, the parties perceive each other to be, at the core, "strangers" (Wolff, 1950). The attribution of stranger and the feeling of mistrust associated with it can stay the same or change throughout the relationship.

The first two interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted 30 minutes each. I have known both participants for about 3 years, as we are part of a small Romanian-American community in South Jersey. The first interviewee, A, was a 60 years old Romanian female. She came to the U.S. 20 years ago and, although she had a degree in Agronomy from Romania, she found work in the cleaning business, after several unsuccessful attempts to make money. Throughout our interview, she told lots of stories of people whom she trusted. She seemed to think that ethnicity didn't have an impact on trust, as one of her stories pointed out - a story about how she helped two American families in a major way. When asked about how she would feel when she didn't trust someone, she said that probably she wouldn't tell that person anything, but she would move away from the person. I was interested in finding out why she wouldn't talk to the person at all. She said: "it's pointless, if they don't get it, you don't accomplish anything by explaining things." (Fieldnotes, December 2013).

The second interviewee, B, a 39 years old Romanian male, had an interesting definition of trust. He said that "trust and truth are related, you cannot have trust without truth". He went on to

say that being culturally different doesn't have any impact on trust. He trusts others of different ethnicities. However, he says that everybody can be trusted up to a degree. The only people he trusts fully are his parents.

The next two interviews were done by email. I "met" C, a 39 years old Romanian female living in Sweden, on Facebook. I "liked" her page and I noticed that she posted about Romania. I started a conversation with her and she was willing to participate in the interview. She became an expat by choice at age 16. She describes herself as "a citizen of the world" and she doesn't accept the label "intercultural friends," justifying that she doesn't make any difference among friends. For her, friends "are those who stay." When asked about her definition of trust, she first refers to trust as being reliable (coming to a meeting on time), then she makes two general references about trust, "I trust everybody until proven wrong," and "I just see PEOPLE." She does say in a precautionary manner, that she doesn't want to give personal examples, as "they can be angled wrongly." This can suggest that, either she simply hasn't experienced mistrust, or that I, as a researcher, didn't develop a trusting relationship with her, so I can be privy to such examples.

I have also "met" D, a 47 years old Romanian male from Ireland on Facebook 5 years ago. He talks about two intercultural friendships, one that was formed over 20 years, and another that was formed over two hours (over lunch). He believes that a first impression is also one in which trust forms. He also makes a difference between different levels or aspects of trust: "trusting someone who has your interests at heart" versus "trusting someone to act in a particular manner." He identifies the first aspect with family and close friends. He thinks that the most important thing in trusting someone is "that they are honest," and "that they are motivated by a set of values that I can empathise with." One very interesting account that D gives of the internal experience of trust relates to communication: "when I trust someone, I feel I can depend on them & that the conversation can be relied on." Similarly, when he experiences mistrust, "the communication would probably be ok, but a little pointless at that stage." He states what A had stated: "In a situation where I do not trust someone, I would act to reduce my exposure to them."

E, a Romanian-American male in his late 30s, and F, a Romanian-American female in her early 40s, agreed with A and D that, when they don't trust someone, they simply avoid the person. These two interviews were also conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately half an hour each. E and F were married to each other and their overall responses looked similar. For instance, firstly, both said that they trusted everybody, regardless of nationality. After more probing questions, both agreed that it was easier to trust Romanians than Americans.

Results

Several themes can be drawn from the stories on trust and mistrust of these six individuals: trust as an inner experience that binds people on a deep level, trust as a commodity, and trust as a socially acceptable image.

Trust as an inner experience
All six informants referred to the deep experience of trust that we have with the people closest to us: A, when stated she couldn't let herself be vulnerable with others who are not like here; B, when mentioned that the only people he could fully trust were his parents; D, when he defined trust as "trusting someone who has your best interests at heart", and E and F when stating that "you'll always be a stranger unless you are among your family." F was especially explicit about how this deep experience of trust can be created with "your own people." She stated that, although she had North American and South American friends, she could only be herself among Romanians

because "they are the only people who are like you, who can understand you." To reinforce her deep connection with the Romanian culture, she mentioned how she watches Romanian television: two days a week, she wakes up at 5:00 am to watch a telenovela broadcasted on a Romanian channel. She also has a scheduled Romanian program right after she finishes her job three times a week. Per total, she said she watched more than 15 hours of Romanian television per week. When I asked her how she felt watching Romanian television, her answer was "I feel like home." I understood that she missed a certain type of experience, of being herself, that she couldn't reproduce in her new home and television was the solution she found to recreate that experience. The only person who didn't mention this aspect of trust was C. Most of her responses, though, can be interpreted as creating a socially acceptable image, a theme which will be discussed later.

Trust as a commodity

D, the Romanian male living in Ireland who responded to my questions through email, defined this type of trust as "trusting someone to act in a particular manner," which is what it's commonly referred to as perceived reliability or trustworthiness. It is a more pragmatic and more limited-in-time view of trust. I found that C, the Romanian female living in Sweden had the same view of trust. When someone views trust as a commodity, he or she has thinks of human interactions in short periods of time. Trust is like a service that can be exchanged with another service: I trust an electrician to fix my lights, I trust an educator to teach a child to write, etc. This is different than a long-term relationship with another person, in which we open ourselves deeply and become vulnerable. An electrician may not fix the lights and I may become frustrated. But if a friend betrays me, I am more deeply wounded. The fact that both C and D focused their responses on this type of trust can be interpreted in several ways. One interpretation can be cultural: C lives in Sweden and D lives in Ireland, while the other informants all lived in the US. Both European countries are geographically closer to Romania and it is possible that the Romanian immigrants visit their friends and relatives often. They may not feel the need for deep connections as the Romanian Americans may feel. Another explanation is methodological. It happened that these two interviews with C and D were the only ones conducted through email. This could have obstructed me from developing a closer relationship with both of them. They may not have felt comfortable enough to disclose their most inner feelings of vulnerability.

Trust as a socially acceptable image

This theme emerged mainly from the experience of the Romanian-Americans, especially informants A and E, but also informant C. I have known A and E for about 3 years, and I have developed a good relationship with each of them. That is why I was surprised to hear how both of them went to great lengths to assure me, during the interview, that they trust people regardless of ethnicity. Had I not heard them previously expressing distrust in Americans, I would have been convinced that they were very trusting, ethnicity-blind, fully integrated individuals. A commented that she was a very trusting person: "I don't have anything with anybody. I'm very trusting. If they are "serious people" I trust them." By "serious people" she meant "responsible, trustworthy individuals." In the same time, A was a competitive person, someone who got what she wanted. She was very careful to present an image of herself as a powerful and knowing individual. Not trusting others, especially Americans, was an implicit acknowledgement that she wasn't "socially ok." E, on the other hand, seemed to want to project another image: one of a friendly, open minded, and tolerant person. She didn't seem to be as competitive as A, but she saw herself as friendly and down-to-earth. In principal she trusted everyone: "I've made all sorts of friends, I have American friends, I have South American friends, I have Romanian friends. I like to be friends with

everyone." After more probing questions, I realized that her closest friends were Romanians from her hometown. Several Americans whom she befriended through her daughter were not so close anymore. Finally, C, the Romanian living in Sweden, projected an image of herself as a worldly person. She defined herself as a "citizen of the world," who has been traveling since the age of 16. In this image of a "new age" kind of person, trusting unalike others is expected. However, the fact that she preferred to stick to a more pragmatic view of trust and the fact that she avoided personal examples because "they can be angled wrongly", suggest that she didn't trust as easily as she wanted to appear.

Discussions

As we have seen from the themes presented, trust is a complex phenomenon that is actively constructed by Romanian immigrants, based on their personal and cultural background. My initial research question asked how metacommunication about trust differs from the actual trust experience.

The examination of the six interviewees' view of trust in intercultural relationships provided a glimpse into this question. The themes of trust as a commodity and of trust as a socially accepted image suggest that metacommunication about trust does not always match the actual trusting behavior. At least for the six Romanian immigrants, talking about trust does not necessarily mean trusting. While personality factors can definitely explain the disconnect, the cultural factors are interesting to discuss as well. All my informants have lived parts of their lives under the Communist regime, which discouraged trusting foreigners. All of them lived the first parts of their lives in a collectivistic culture such as Romania and then moved to more individualistic cultures, such as the US, Ireland, and Sweden. They probably became more acutely aware of the difference between the in-group versus the out-group. The cultural context (high or low) may also explain the two trust themes. A said it perfectly when she explained how she would act with someone whom she didn't trust: "if they don't get it, you don't accomplish anything by explaining things." I find this sentence very representative of a high-context individual. Words are not useful to understand something. The meaning is in persons, not in words. It is logical to assume that the Romanians interviewed are rather high-context individuals. They expect to form trust not by communication alone, but by sharing emotions and by actions. Their interpretation of the communication style of the ethnically different others may have prevented them from developing deeper, more trusting relationships.

Conclusions

In sum, the experience of six Romanian immigrants in Ireland, Sweden, and United States suggested that trust is a socially constructed experience that can be interpreted as an inner experience, as a commodity, or as a socially acceptable image. The common Romanian collectivistic culture and the move to more individualistic cultures can explain the distrust of foreigners. The communication style of the Romanian high-context culture can also explain the mistrust in a more explicit, low-context communication style. Overall, the experience of being a stranger in another country hinders the development of an open relationship.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, being a qualitative study of six individuals chosen conveniently, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population of Romanian immigrants. More people should be interviewed to support the found themes. Secondly, the interviews were conducted individually. Initially, I thought that this would make the participants

more comfortable disclosing personal information. However, I noticed the socially acceptable answers randomly throughout the interviews. A focus group with Romanian immigrants only may offer a safer opportunity for people to voice their opinions. Thirdly, the study did not focus on personality characteristics of the interviewees. The trust literature tells us that people have different levels of generalized trust to begin with. It would be interesting to analyze the level of trust of the Romanian immigrants before they leave Romania. Lastly, as fruitful future direction for study, I suggest that researchers delve into communication as a vehicle through which trust is built and sustained. The present study offers some support to the idea that going from a high-context to a low-context culture can be detrimental to trust formation. What are the interpretations that a high-context person needs to make to adjust to a low-context culture? What role does the community (both Romanian immigrants and locals) play in helping the immigrants to build trust in unalike others? All these questions and more others are fruitful avenues for future research.

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