

2014 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Proposal

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1. Project title and descriptive summary:

Ethical dilemmas and trust

Trust is essential to organizations and interpersonal relationships (e.g. Blau, 1964; Golembiewski & McConkie, 1975; Valley, Moag, & Bazerman, 1998). Developing and sustaining trust improves leadership effectiveness, fosters cooperation, and helps firms manage risk (Atwater, 1988; Bazerman, 1994; Sheppard & Sherman, 1998).

In the present research, we explore how individuals make trusting decisions when they have conflicting information about a trustee's trustworthiness. Specifically, we examine how conflicts between justice and care influence trust. Justice is a moral foundation that prioritizes fairness, honesty and universal moral principles and rules; care is a moral foundation that prioritizes the obligation to help and protect other people (Gilligan, 1982; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Many of the most difficult ethical dilemmas are characterized by a conflict between justice and care. For example, policy makers face this conflict when they make decisions about how to allocate taxes and welfare (i.e. based on equality versus need), and judges face this conflict when they make decisions about whether to assign just punishment or show mercy.

Respecting justice and providing care are also two central antecedents of perceived trustworthiness (e.g. Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Surprisingly, existing models of trust do not offer insight into how individuals make judgments of trustworthiness when these signals conflict. This is an important omission. By exploring how trust responds to competing signals, we can build an understanding of how the nature of trust differs across relationships and contexts, and why trust breaks down, despite efforts to signal positive moral traits.

Our research suggests that for many types of trust, demonstrating care is more important than preserving justice. For example, employees trust colleagues who lie to help their friends (Study 1) and they trust managers who break company policies to protect employees (Study 2).

Interestingly, we find that these decisions, despite increasing trust, harm judgments of moral character. Although existing research assumes that judgments of trustworthiness and moral character are intimately linked, we document instances in which they diverge.

In future studies, we seek to understand the complex relationship between justice, care, moral character, and trust. Specifically, we plan to investigate the following research questions: 1) For what types of trust (e.g. affective versus cognitive trust) is care more important than justice?; 2) In what types of relationships (e.g. friendship versus leadership) is care more important than justice for building trust?; 3) Why do we trust people who we perceive to be immoral and what are the consequences?

This course of research deepens our understanding of the mechanics of trust. Making trusting decisions is difficult, and existing trust research has not considered how individuals resolve trust dilemmas or how the bases of trust may differ across relationships. Practically, this research also provides insight into why individuals systematically misplace trust. By examining when and why we trust people who are perceived to be immoral, we offer prescriptive advice on how to manage relationships, avoid exploitation, and navigate risk.

Planned Program of Studies.

Below we provide an overview of the studies run to date and the planned course of research.

Topic	Description	Status
Study 1: Trusting immoral people (Scenario 1)	Participants read a scenario in which a target faced an ethical dilemma, pitting loyalty against truth. Individuals who chose loyalty were perceived to be less moral ($p < .04$), but more trustworthy ($p < .03$).	Completed (MTurk, N=160)
Study 2: Trusting immoral people (Scenario 2)	Participants read a scenario in which a target faced an ethical dilemma, pitting mercy against justice. Individuals who chose mercy were perceived to be less moral ($p < .01$), but more trustworthy ($p < .01$).	Completed (MTurk, N=160)
Study 3: Trusting immoral people (Behavior)	In this study, participants will observe a confederate make a decision that either favors an ethic of justice (e.g. truth, fairness) or an ethic of care (e.g. loyalty, mercy, empathy). Participants will then rate the target on morality and trust and have the opportunity to make a trusting decision.	To run: WBL April 2014
Study 4: Trusting immoral people to be friends, but not leaders	In a future study, we plan to demonstrate that individuals who favor an ethic of care are chosen as friends (despite being perceived as less moral), but individuals who favor an ethic of justice are chosen as leaders.	To run: summer 2014

2. Name of project advisor: Maurice E. Schweitzer



References

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