Trust in Coworkers and Employee Behaviors at Work

Ong Lin Dar*

Research into interpersonal trust within organizational contexts tends to focus on managers as the referent, largely ignoring the topic of trust amongst coworkers. Investigations of coworker trust focus on a different referent, and are expected to have unique effects on employee behaviors. In this paper, the researcher first reviews the extant literature on trust in coworkers, trustworthiness, social undermining, organizational citizenship behavior and counterproductive work behavior. Then, a model is presented to better understand the role of coworkers in shaping focal employee trust in coworkers, which in turn may influences his or her behaviors at work. Finally, this paper explains how the propositions derived from the proposed model.

Field of Research: Human Resource Management

1. Introduction

The importance of coworkers is magnified by current organizational trends. Many of today's workplace draws on flatter organizational structure and have more team-based work. Research found that coworkers can provide a focal employee with a sense of identity, support, and friendship (Bowler & Brass, 2006). In a meta-analysis by Chiaburu and Harrison (2008), coworker actions were found matter for their colleagues. For example, coworkers support can affect individual employees' presence at work (Iverson, Olekalns, & Erwin, 1998) and intention to quit (Cox, 1999). Nevertheless, several important questions remain unanswered in the lateral relationships research. To date, no study has been directed to combining entire range of actions originating from coworkers and individual work behaviors.

Focal employee has little, if any, power or control over coworkers' actions (Tan & Lim, 2009). Therefore, trust is prominent in lateral relationships. Most literature in trust focused on leader-subordinate relations (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) and trust in each coworker (e.g. Lau & Liden, 2008). Research on trust directed at coworkers in general has been relatively sparse (Ferres, Connell, & Travaglione, 2004). Seeing that trust in coworkers may have unique effects on focal employee behaviors at work, examination of this topic can add value to the existing trust research.

*Ong Lin Dar, Faculty of Business and Accountancy, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: ong_lindar@yahoo.com

Several studies have investigated the influence of trust in coworker on important organizational and individual outcomes. For example, coworker trust is found related to individual willingness to share resources with a coworker (Dirks & Skarlicki, 2009), perceived organizational support, turnover intention, and affective commitment (Ferres et al., 2004). However, no study has examined the effect of trust in coworkers on both focal employee's organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and counterproductive work behavior (CWB), directed at the coworkers and organization as a whole. Ferres et al. (2004) suggested that OCBs can be studied as additional outcomes of coworker trust. This paper first reviews the literature on trust in coworkers, trustworthiness, social undermining, OCB, and CWB. Subsequently, this paper presents the proposed model and explains how the propositions derived from the model.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Trust in Coworkers

Following the definition that Mayer et al. (1995) provided, Tan and Lim (2009) defined trust in coworkers as "the willingness of a person to be vulnerable to the actions of fellow coworkers whose behavior and actions that person cannot control" (p. 46). 'Coworkers' refers to members of an organization who hold relatively equal power or level of authority and with whom an employee interacts during the workday. Tan and Lim observed that trust in coworkers is positively related to trust in organizations, and trust in organizations fully mediated the relations between trust in coworkers and organizational commitment, and between trust in coworkers and performance.

2.2 Trustworthiness

Mayer and associates (1995) developed a model of organizational trust which holds that individual perceptions of trustee's trustworthiness (the ability, benevolence, and integrity) will influence his or her expectations of trustee. This model materializes in most frequently in trust literature. For example, Mayer and Davis (1999) found that all three components contributed to the prediction of trust. Ability refers to the relevant knowledge and skills needed to do a specific job along with the interpersonal skills and general wisdom needed to succeed in an organization (Gabarro, 1978). As noted by Colquitt, Scott, and LePine (2007), the facet of ability captures "can-do" element of trustworthiness. Benevolence is the extent to which the trustee is believed to want to do good for the trustor, without any profit motives, and its synonyms comprise loyalty, openness, caring, or supportiveness (Mayer et al., 1995). Benevolence represents the "will-do" element of trustworthiness (Colquitt et al., 2007). This means individuals can choose whether or not to use their abilities for the interest of the trustor. Integrity refers to the extent to which a trustor perceives the trustee adheres to a set of principles that trustor finds acceptable to him or her (Mayer et al., 1995). The

facet of integrity also signifies the "will-do" element and its synonyms include fairness, justice, consistency, and promise fulfillment (Colquitt et al., 2007).

2.3 Social Undermining

Vinokur and van Ryn (1993) defined social undermining as those behaviors directed at a target that exhibit (1) negative emotions (e.g., anger and dislike); (2) negative evaluation of the target's attributes, actions, and efforts (e.g., criticism); and/or (3) other behaviors deliberate to hinder the target's accomplishment of instrumental goals. Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) refined the concept and extend it to the workplace context. They defined social undermining as intentional behaviors that are aimed at holding back employees' ability to build and uphold positive interpersonal relationships, achieve success, and maintain positive reputation at work. Previous research suggests that social undermining behaviors have negative organizational consequences such as increased counterproductive work behaviors, reciprocated social undermining, and decreased job satisfaction. These behaviors can also cause negative personal outcomes such as depression, decreased self-esteem, and psychosomatic symptoms (Duffy et al., 2006).

2.4 Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB)

OCB has been defined as "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988, p.4). It has been labeled as extra-role behaviors (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006) and contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Scholars have expanded the concept of OCB to include several components. For example, Smith, Organ, and Near (1983) first posited two factors of generalized compliance and altruism. Organ (1997) then suggested that a two-factor model is potentially a better conceptualization and that his original typology of generalized compliance and altruism was consistent with the facets described by Williams and Anderson (1991). This two-factor theory states that OCB can be directed toward the organization (OCB-O) or toward other individuals (OCB-I). As summarized by Podsakoff, Ahearne, and MacKenzie (1997), OCBs may enhance organizational performance as they (1) diminish the need to devote scarce resources to maintenance functions, (2) open up those resources for more productive purposes, (3) enhance the productivity of coworkers and managerial staff, and (4) help facilitate the coordination of activities between team members and across work groups.

2.5 Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)

Organizational members engage in CWB when they harm or intent to harm the organization and/or other organizational stakeholders (Spector & Fox, 2005). Robinson and Bennett (1995) defined CWB as "voluntary behavior of

organizational members that violates significant organizational norms, and in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization and/or its members" (p. 556). CWB include negative employee behaviors such as not following the manager's instructions, intentionally slowing down the work cycle, arriving late, committing petty theft and not treating coworkers with respect and/or acting rudely with coworkers.

Similar to OCB, CWB is hypothesized to have two factors, based on whether the target of the CWB is the organization (CWB-O) or the target is other individuals within the organization (CWB-I; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Although the literature has suggested that OCB and CWB are related (e.g., Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997), models testing their relationship have been developed only in recent years (e.g., Kelloway et al., 2002). These studies support the notion that OCB and CWB are two distinct constructs.

3. Conceptual Framework

Not many studies have examined the mechanisms that underpin the relationship between coworkers influence and its effects on focal employee. As an indicator of the quality of the relationships with coworkers, trust is proximal to the employee behaviors and therefore should mediate the relationship between coworkers' trustworthiness and the focal employee work behaviors; and between coworkers' social undermining behaviors and the work behaviors. Figure 3.1 outlines the proposed research model.

Figure 3.1
The Research Model
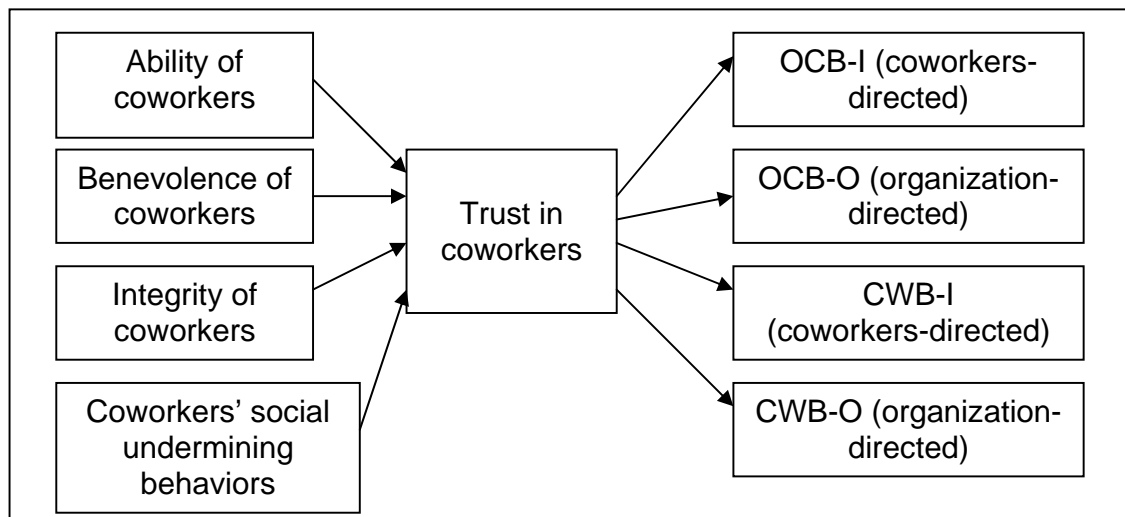
3.1 Coworkers' Trustworthiness and Trust in Coworkers

Using Singaporean Chinese as sample, Tan and Lim (2009) found that only benevolence and integrity of coworkers were significantly and positively related to trust in coworkers. They argued that ability of coworkers was not related to trust in coworkers because Chinese people tend to emphasize on positive attitudes toward others instead of mastery. The sample also solely consists of insurance agents, which have low degrees of task complexity. Thus, Tan and Lim highlighted this can be the reason why they found ability of coworkers was not crucial in predicting trust in coworkers.

In a study by Dirks and Skarlicki (2009) in Canada, capability and integrity interacted to affect the willingness to share resources with the coworker because they inspire trust. They reported trust mediated the relationship between perceptions of trustworthiness factors (capability and integrity) and individuals' willingness to share resources with a coworker. In Tan and Lim's (2009) study, benevolence is the most significant factor of trustworthiness, but Dirks and Skarlicki found capability and integrity are integrative factors that influence trust in coworkers. This shows the support for the importance of the three trustworthiness factors has not been absolute.

As a further test of the Mayer et al.'s (1995) model, it is proposed:

Hypothesis 1a: The perceived ability of coworkers is positively related to trust in coworkers.
Hypothesis 1b: The perceived benevolence of coworkers is positively related to trust in coworkers.
Hypothesis 1c: The perceived integrity of coworkers is positively related to trust in coworkers.

3.2 Coworkers' Social Undermining Behaviors and Trust in Coworkers

Duffy et al. (2002) found that supervisor undermining was negatively related to self-efficacy, organizational commitment, active and passive counterproductive behaviors as well as somatic complaints. Besides, coworker undermining was found positively related to active counterproductive behaviors and somatic complaints. Prior research indicated that competitive and self-serving behaviors are not likely to be considered diagnostic of trustworthiness (e.g., Butler, 1995). Thus, coworkers' social undermining behaviors are expected to result in lower levels of trust in coworkers.

Hypothesis 2: Coworkers' social undermining behaviors are negatively related to trust in coworkers.

3.3 Trust in Coworkers and Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Several studies suggested that trust in coworkers was linked to OCB-I. For example, Settoon and Mossholder's (2002) field data from two organizations showed positive relationships between trust in coworkers and interpersonal citizenship behavior (ICB) directed at peers. Settoon and Mossholder stated that ICB and OCB-I are conceptually similar in which they involve cooperative assistance for individuals in need. Many studies found trust in organization was positively related to OCB (e.g., Aryee, Buhwar, & Chen, 2002). As Tan and Lim (2009) reported trust in coworkers led to trust in organization, it is expected that trust in coworkers may also directly affect employee's OCB directed at the organization (OCB-O).

Hypothesis 3a: Trust in coworkers is positively related to OCB directed at the coworkers (OCB-I).
Hypothesis 3b: Trust in coworkers is positively related to OCB directed at the organization (OCB-O).

3.4 Trust in Coworkers and Counterproductive Work Behavior

Low trust may be manifested in resistance behaviors, such as the deliberate withholding of information (Zand, 1972), refusal to cooperate, and frequent monitoring of coworkers (Strickland, 1958). Extending this research to exchange relationships among coworkers, it is reasonable to believe that when a focal employee trusts his or her coworkers, he or she will unlikely engage in CWB. This is based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) which predicts that when individuals are dissatisfied with their coworkers, they may reciprocate with CWBs, such as playing mean pranks, cursing at coworkers, or even sabotaging their work. As noted by Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006), an employee who is involved in interpersonal conflict with coworkers and supervisor is likely to engage in harmful behaviors directed at other employees and the organization. It would be interesting to explore whether levels of trust in coworkers can directly influence focal employee's CWBs at the workplace.

Hypothesis 4a: Trust in coworkers is negatively related to CWB directed at the coworkers (CWB-I).
Hypothesis 4b: Trust in coworkers is negatively related to CWB directed at the organization (CWB-O).

3.5 The Mediating Role of Trust in Coworkers

Chen, Aryee, and Lee (2005) reported trust in organization partially mediated the perceived organizational support and OCB relationship. Besides, Aryee, Budhwar, and Zhen (2002) found that trust in supervisor fully mediated the relationship between interactional justice and the interpersonally- and organizationally-directed dimensions of OCB. When one receives social support,

one feels an obligation to provide something in return and therefore provides social support to the individual who initially provided one with social support (Buunk et al., 1993). Given that a social exchange relationship is characterized by mutual loyalty, goodwill and support, and trust is a manifestation of social exchange, trust in coworkers is expected to mediate the relationship between coworkers' trustworthiness (ability, benevolence and integrity, ABI) and employee work behaviors; and between coworkers' social undermining behaviors and employee work behaviors.

Hypothesis 5a: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers ABI and OCB directed at coworkers (OCB-I).
Hypothesis 5b: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers ABI and OCB directed at the organization (OCB-O).
Hypothesis 5c: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers ABI and CWB directed at coworkers (CWB-I).
Hypothesis 5d: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers ABI and CWB directed at the organization (CWB-O).

Hypothesis 6a: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers' social undermining and OCB directed at coworkers (OCB-I).
Hypothesis 6b: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers' social undermining and OCB directed at the organization (OCB-O).
Hypothesis 6c: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers' social undermining and CWB directed at coworkers (CWB-I).
Hypothesis 6d: Trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between coworkers' social undermining and CWB directed at the organization (CWB-O).

4. Conclusion

This paper aims to review workplace friendship, trust, OCB and CWB research, and provide a new conceptual framework to better understand organizational lateral relationship. The proposed model shows that coworkers' trustworthiness factors and social undermining behaviors can play a critical role in shaping focal employee' trust in coworkers, which in turn, may influence his or her behaviors at work. This study will help explain why employees might be engage in exchanges with their coworkers and how their trust in coworkers can influence their positive and negative behaviors toward the coworkers and the organization as a whole.

References

Aryee, S., Budhwar, P. & Chen, Z., 2002. Trust as a mediator of the relationship between organizational justice and work outcomes: Test of a social exchange model, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, vol. 23, pp. 267-285.

Borman, W. & Motowidlo , S., 1993. Expanding the criterion domain to include elements of contextual performance. In *N. Schmitt & W. C. Borman (Eds.), Personnel selection in organizations.* San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, pp. 71-98.

Bowler, M. & Brass, D., 2006. Relational correlates of interpersonal citizenship behavior: A social network perspective, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 91, pp. 70-82.

Bruk-Lee, V. & Spector, P., 2006. The social stressors-counterproductive work behaviors link: are conflicts with supervisors and coworkers the same? *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 145-156.

Butler, J., 1995. Behaviours, trust, and goal achievement in a win-win negotiating role play, *Group and Organizational Management*, vol. 20, no.4, pp. 486-501.

Buunk, B. et al., 1993. Perceived reciprocity, social support, and stress at work: the role of exchange and communal orientation, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 65, pp. 801-811.

Chen, Z., Aryee, S. & Lee, C., 2005. Test of a mediation model of perceived organizational support, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 66, no. 3, pp. 457-470.

Chiaburu, D. & Harrison, D., 2008. Do Coworkers Make the Place? Conceptual Synthesis and Meta-Analysis of Lateral Social Influences in Organizations, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 93, no. 5, pp. 1082-1103.

Colquitt, J.A., Scott, B. & LePine, J., 2007. Trust, trustworthiness, and trust propensity: a meta-analytic test of their unique relationships with risk taking and job performance, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 92, no. 4, pp. 900-927.

Cox, S., 1999. Group communication and employee turnover: How coworkers encourage peers to voluntarily exit, *Southern Communication Journal*, vol. 64, pp. 181-192.

Crossley, C., 2009. Emotional and behavioral reactions to social undermining: A closer look at perceived offender motives, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 108, no.1, pp. 14-24.

Dirks, K. & Ferrin, D., 2002. Trust in leadership: Meta-analytic findings and implications for research and practice, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 87, no. 4, pp. 611-628.

Dirks, K. & Skarlicki, D., 2009. The relationship between being perceived as trustworthy by coworkers and individual performance, *Journal of Management*, vol. 35, no.1, pp. 136-157.

Duffy, M. et al., 2006. The social context of undermining behavior at work, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 101, no. 1, pp. 105-126.

Duffy, M., Ganster, D. & Pagon, M., 2002. Social undermining in the workplace, *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 331-351.

Ferres, N., Connell, J. & Travaglione, A., 2004. Coworker Trust as a Social Catalyst for Constructive Employee Attitudes, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 608-622.

Gabarro, J., 1978. The development of trust influence and expectations. In *A.G. Thos & J.J. Gabarro (Eds.), Interpersonal behavior: Communication and understanding in relationships.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, pp. 290-303.

Gouldner, A., 1960. The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 161-178.

Iverson, R., Olekalns, M. & Erwin, P., 1998. Affectivity, Organizational Stressors, and Absenteeism: A Causal Model of Burnout and Its Consequences, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 52, no. 1, pp. 1-23.

Kelloway, E. et al., 2002. Self reported counter productive behavior and organizational citizenship behaviors: Separate but related constructs, *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, vol. 10, pp. 143-151.

Lau, D. & Liden, R., 2008. Antecedents of coworker trust: leaders' blessings, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 93, no. 5, pp. 1130-1138.

Mayer, R. & Davis, J., 1999. The effect of the performance appraisal system on trust for management: a field quasi-experiment, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 84, no. 1, pp. 123-136.

Mayer, R., Davis, J. & Schoorman, F., 1995. An integrative model of organizational trust, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 709-734.

Organ, D., 1988. *Organizational citizenship behavior: The good soldier syndrome*, Lexington, MA, England: Lexington Books.

Organ, D., 1997. Organizational citizenship behavior: It's construct clean-up time. *Human Performance*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 85-97.

Organ, D., Podsakoff, P. & MacKenzie, S., 2006. *Organizational citizenship behavior: Its nature, antecedents, and consequences*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Podsakoff, P. & MacKenzie, S., 1997. Impact of organizational citizenship behavior on organizational performance: A review and suggestion for future research, *Human Performance*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 133-151.

Podsakoff, P., Ahearne, M. & MacKenzie, S., 1997. Organizational citizenship behavior and the quantity and quality of work group performance, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 82, no. 2, pp. 262-270.

Robinson, S. & Bennett, R., 1995. A typology of deviant workplace behaviors: A multidimensional scaling study, *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 38, pp. 555-572.

Settoon, R. & Mossholder, K., 2002. Relationship quality and relationship context as antecedents of person- and task-focused interpersonal citizenship behavior, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 255-267.

Smith, C., Organ, D. & Near, J., 1983. Organizational citizenship behavior: Its nature and antecedents, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 653-663.

Spector, P. & Fox, S., 2005. *A model of counterproductive work behavior*, Washington, DC: S. Fox & P. E. Spector (Eds.). Counterproductive Workplace Behavior: Investigations of actors and targets.

Strickland, L., 1958. Surveillance and trust. *Journal of Personality*, 26, 200-215.

Tan, H. & Lim, A., 2009. Trust in coworkers and trust in organizations, *The Journal of Psychology*, vol. 143, no. 1, pp. 45-66.

Williams, L. & Anderson, S., 1991. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment as predictors of organizational citizenship and in-role behaviors, *Journal of Management*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 601-617.

Zand, D., 1972. Trust and managerial problem solving, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 17, pp. 229-239.