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Organizational Change: An Assessment of Trust and Cynicism

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16. Abstract <p>In the organizational science literature, organizational cynicism is generally considered to be conceptually distinct from organizational trust. This proposition, however, has not been adequately assessed. The present study attempts to distinguish these two constructs by utilizing organizational-level focused measures. Two surveys were administered about six months apart to members of a division that was undergoing change in a large federal agency. Data could be matched for 70 of the respondents on the two surveys. The results show that a measure of cynicism about change does not predict trust in coworkers or trust in work area managers, but does predict trust in division managers. These results do not conclusively demonstrate a distinction between the two constructs, however, they suggest that the constructs are related in a predictable manner. Finally, from the data obtained in this study of an organizational group undergoing change, it appears that trust of management is related to increased workgroup cohesion, and that trust is not due only to workforce cynicism. Instead, trust and cynicism may need to be addressed separately by management in order to most successfully implement change.</p>			
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ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: AN ASSESSMENT OF TRUST AND CYNICISM

Workplace cynicism is an emerging topic in the organizational science literature (Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Bateman, Sakano, & Fujita, 1992; Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Thompson, Bailey, Joseph, Worley, & Williams, 1999). Outside of some specific employee groups, such as police officers and social workers, cynicism research in the broader organizational context is in the “introduction and elaboration” stage (Reichers & Schneider, 1990, p. 6). Therefore, most of the recent theory and research on organizational cynicism have proposed models of cynicism, suggesting antecedents and consequences of cynicism. In addition, this literature has discussed methods of addressing such cynicism in the context of organizational change. The literature also has discussed how organizational cynicism could be distinguished from other organizationally relevant variables. However, little empirical work has focused on clarifying such distinctions. One such issue in need of clarification is the distinction between cynicism and trust; more specifically, cynicism and distrust (Thompson et al., 1999).

Several writers have indicated that organizational cynicism is conceptually distinct from organizational trust. However, at least one empirical assessment found a moderate correlation between survey measures of cynicism about change and organizational trust (Thompson et al., 1999). Intuitively, it seems that cynicism and trust would likely be correlated, even if they were unique concepts. For example, if a person is cynical about the future behavior of an attitude object (e.g., a manager), it is likely that the person would likewise express some level of distrust toward the attitude object. Similarly, if a person trusts an attitude object, it seems unlikely that the person also would be cynical about that object’s future behavior. Nonetheless, a review of the literature on organizational cynicism and trust reveals conceptual distinctions between cynicism and trust, and other organizationally relevant variables (e.g., job satisfaction). Such distinctions have yet to be tested. Moreover, the literature suggests that cynicism and distrust result from a similar unmet expectations

and frustration process. This paper reviews the literature on trust and cynicism, discusses the processes assumed to be necessary for the development of both cynicism and trust, and provides a test of the relationship between cynicism and trust in an effort to show a distinction between the two constructs.

Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) define trust as “a willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the party” (p. 712). The model developed by these authors does not apply to “trust in a social system” (p. 729). Nonetheless, the model suggests that individuals in a setting will each make trust decisions regarding specific individuals and events. Some support for this contention has been found (Butler & Cantrell, 1984). The decision to trust an individual party is the cumulative result of past experiences with that party. Because the model is focused on individuals, the model does not address issues such as preconceived notions regarding an individual’s race or gender. Hosmer’s (1995) review of the organizational trust literature suggests that trust should lead to greater cooperation among dyads, organizational stakeholders, and members of a society. Both the Hosmer and Mayer et al. (1995) reviews suggest that an individual can have differing levels of trust for the different parties in an organization, such as coworkers, supervisors, and the various levels of management. Andersson (1996) suggests that cynicism is distinct from trust because cynicism is broader in scope and, while it includes a component of mistrust, it also incorporates the affective components of hopelessness and disillusionment. For Andersson, trust does not include an affective component because it is defined as a belief, not an attitude. Defined this way, the belief component of trust is included in cynicism, which is an attitude.

Similar distinctions are made by Dean et al. (1998), who define organizational cynicism as “a negative attitude toward one’s employing organization” (p. 345). Their definition follows the traditional tripartite model of attitudes (Pratkanis & Greenwald,

1989), which includes three separate concepts: belief, affect, and behavioral components. Conceptualizing organizational cynicism as an attitude means it is a state that is more readily changeable, compared with a personality trait. This conceptualization further implies that a cynical attitude is subject to the same change process limitations as are other attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1980). Support for conceptualizing cynicism as an attitude is found in research showing that viewing a movie intended to increase cynicism towards American business had the intended effect (Bateman et al., 1992).

Dean et al. (1998) used the Mayer et al. (1995) definition of trust to distinguish cynicism from trust based on several dimensions. First, Dean et al. suggest that a lack of trust is possibly due to a lack of experience with the other party, whereas cynicism is argued to be “almost certainly based on experience” (p. 348). Second, trust requires vulnerability on the part of the trustor. Trust is not relevant without vulnerability; however, one can be cynical without being vulnerable. Third, the notion of trust includes a facilitative or cooperative component. Fourth, in contrast to cynicism, trust is argued to lack an affective component, a contention supported by Andersson (1996). Fifth, Mayer et al. cite research that shows a low correlation between measures of trust and cynicism.

Kanter and Mirvis (1989) examined the relationship between cynicism and trust in management and trust in coworkers. In general, their analyses suggest that cynicism is predictive of levels of trust in an organization. Thus, the authors do not make specific distinctions between cynicism and trust; instead, they suggest that increased cynicism is one possible precursor of distrust. Kanter and Mirvis do make a distinction between trust in management and trust in coworkers. Such a distinction is sensible, given group differences in the power, decision-making authority, level in the organization’s structure, and the amount of day-to-day interaction that occurs among individuals at different levels of an organizational hierarchy.

Finally, similar developmental processes have been proposed for organizational cynicism and distrust. Kramer (1999) reviews several studies that have examined how “unmet or violated expectations” (p. 589) can explain why the public reports less trust in various institutions. Kramer’s thesis suggests that highly visible events that demonstrate the inadequacy of a person or institution, following the heightening of expectations for that person or institution, lead to

distrust. Similarly, Kanter and Mirvis (1989) suggest that one way organizations create workforce cynicism is through a process of raising workforce expectations to a level where they cannot be met, which, in turn, leads to workforce frustration. The root cause of both distrust and cynicism is hypothesized to be a cycle of raised expectations that are unmet and the frustration that ensues.

Similar cynicism development processes have been suggested within the context of organizational change (Vance, Brooks, Tesluk, & Howard, 1999). Reichers, Wanous, and Austin (1997) suggest that cynicism about organizational change is a “loss of faith in the leaders of change and a response to a history of change attempts that are not entirely or clearly successful” (p. 48). During organizational change efforts, it is typical for management to explain the proposed changes to employees and provide assurances regarding possible negative consequences of the change. Such actions are taken to help ensure employee support for the change or to prevent resistance to change (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). If explanations and promises made by management are found to be untrue over time, some employees may become cynical about the organization, the leaders of change, and the organizational change effort. Therefore, cynicism about change can be defined as pessimism and hopelessness regarding innovation efforts.

In summary, the review of the literature indicates that organizational cynicism is generally considered to be distinct from organizational trust. There is, however, little research evidence to support this contention. Research by the current authors found a sizable correlation between a measure of cynicism and general organizational trust (Thompson et al., 1999), contrary to Dean and associates’ (1998) contention. In addition, the Dean et al. study found organizational trust to be the best predictor of cynicism about change and perceptions of coworker cynicism. This finding could indicate that trust and cynicism cannot be distinguished statistically, even though the constructs have been defined as conceptually distinct.

A better understanding of the relationship between cynicism and trust will emerge by clarifying these constructs. Given the attitudinal nature of cynicism proposed by Dean et al. (1998), it is likely that cynicism can exist for any set of attitude objects. Moreover, cynicism should be based on experience with the attitude object. Thus, people who have

experienced organizational changes that have not met their expectations or have led to frustration may become cynical about organizational change. This cynicism should be directed at a particular target (Vance, Brooks, & Tesluk, 1995). That target would most likely be upper-level management of the organization, assuming that that group was responsible for the design and implementation of the change. If this is true, cynicism about organizational change should predict trust in upper-level management more strongly than it predicts trust in other organizational groups.

Trust or distrust, like cynicism, should be directed towards specific attitude objects and based on experience with the attitude object. Again, in the context of an organizational change, frustration and unmet expectations should lead to distrust of upper-level management. Therefore, following research utilizing measures that focus on specific attitude objects (Becker, 1992; Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Maslyn & Fedor, 1998), the present study uses three measures of trust that focus on specific levels within the organization to examine the relationships between perceptions of cynicism and trust. Specifically, a measure of trust in division managers, work area managers, and coworkers is predicted from a measure of cynicism about change. In addition, other organizationally relevant variables are included to help clarify the relationship between cynicism about change and the levels of organizational trust.

To control for some individual differences, respondent gender, work area of the organization, and supervisory status are examined. Next, workgroup cohesion is assessed, and is expected to be most strongly related to coworker trust. Job satisfaction is also included because it is possible that employees who are more satisfied are also more trusting of others in the work environment (Driscoll, 1978). In addition, a generic measure of organizational trust is considered. This measure has been found to be highly correlated with cynicism about change in past research (Thompson et al., 1999). It is expected that the measure of organizational trust should be more strongly related to each of the specific measures of trust, compared with cynicism about change. Cynicism about change accounting for additional variance over that accounted for by organizational trust would support the contention that there is some degree of conceptual distinction between these two constructs. Finally, additional measures of organizational change perceptions, active participation in change, and

acceptance of change, are also included. Each of these measures should predict trust, if trust is related to perceptions about organizational change in general.

METHOD

Participants, Procedures, and Setting

Two surveys were administered to employees of a division within a large federal agency during the course of an on-going, large-scale organizational change. The division has three major work areas, each with an area manager. Within two of these work areas are first-line supervisors who report to the area managers. These area managers, in turn, report to an assistant division and division manager. Of the division's 125 employees, 120 completed the first survey. Approximately 6 months later, 85 employees completed the second survey. Due to changes in personnel, the ability to match respondent data on both surveys was available for 70 of the employees.

For both survey administrations, employees volunteered to participate and completed surveys in small groups over the course of a week. A proctor provided instructions and answered employee questions. The proctor also provided assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Employees completed both surveys during normal working hours.

Measures

The employees' supervisory status, gender, and work area were coded from organizational records. All remaining survey measures used a seven-point, Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Measures of job satisfaction, organizational trust, workgroup cohesion, acceptance of change, willingness to change, and cynicism about change were obtained on the first survey. With the exception of cynicism about change, these measures were adapted from Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983). A factor analysis of the larger survey was used to develop the cynicism about change measure. Some of the items that comprised the cynicism measure were also adapted from Camman et al. (1983).

The three measures of trust included on the second survey were developed for this study. The items that comprised each measure were identical, with the exception of the referent. Specifically, the items included a referent to division managers, work area managers, or coworkers. A measure of first-line

supervisor trust was not included on the second survey. The initial survey focused heavily on first-line supervisors, who were rated very positively on all measures. As such, trust also was expected to be high; therefore a measure of first-line supervisor trust was not included to limit the length of the survey.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for all measures, along with internal consistency reliability estimates and intercorrelations are shown in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, all of the measures had Cronbach's alphas greater than .70, indicating reasonable internal consistency reliability of the measures. The correlations in Table 1 also suggest that perceptions of work area manager and division manager trust are very similar ($r = .765$). Both of these measures are also correlated with coworker trust, but to a lesser extent ($r = .323$ and $r = .393$, respectively).

Hierarchical statistical regression was used to predict each trust measure obtained on the second survey. The predictor variables were entered in three steps for each analysis. In the first step, work area, supervisory status, and gender were entered. This step was intended to control for possible individual and work area differences that may exist. The second step included three measures: job satisfaction, organizational trust, and workgroup cohesion. The last step entered three measures of change perceptions: acceptance of change, willingness to change, and cynicism about change.

The analysis of coworker trust is summarized in Table 2. The first step of the regression analysis indicates that respondent work area, supervisory status, and gender are not related to perceptions of coworker trust, $F(3,66) = 2.683$, $p = .054$. In the next analysis step, the measure of organizational trust and workgroup cohesion did predict coworker trust, with the overall model being statistically significant, $F(6,63) = 5.870$, $p < .001$. Table 2 also shows that this step significantly improved the overall variance accounted for by the model. In the final analysis step, the organizational change measures did not improve the prediction of coworker trust nor did they account for significant additional variance.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Estimates, and Intercorrelations for Study Measures

Variables	Descriptive Statistics			Intercorrelations ¹ and Reliabilities ²											
	Mean	S.D.	n	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Supervisor Status	0.16	0.37	70	(na)	-.137	-.073	.261	.053	.126	.008	.266	.256	.217	.237	.308
2. Gender	1.84	0.37	70	-.137	(na)	.073	-.272	-.265	-.196	-.071	-.115	-.214	-.233	-.251	-.292
3. Work Area	2.20	0.65	70	-.073	.073	(na)	-.127	-.210	.021	-.196	-.293	-.127	-.168	-.292	-.254
4. Job Satisfaction	5.64	1.21	70	.261	-.272	-.127	(.74)	.465	.444	.292	.532	.576	.281	.358	.427
5. Organizational Trust	3.77	1.31	70	.053	-.265	-.210	.465	(.72)	.486	.424	.571	.665	.504	.554	.650
6. Workgroup Cohesion	4.55	1.55	70	.126	-.196	.021	.444	.486	(.92)	.235	.480	.344	.460	-.010	.206
7. Willingness to Change	4.81	1.15	70	.008	-.071	-.196	.292	.424	.235	(.79)	.293	.471	.405	.319	.436
8. Acceptance of Change	4.99	1.25	70	.266	-.115	-.293	.532	.571	.480	.293	(.74)	.599	.397	.335	.497
9. Cynicism about Change	4.44	1.23	70	.256	-.214	-.127	.576	.665	.344	.471	.599	(.85)	.457	.580	.721
10. Coworker Trust	4.58	1.53	70	.217	-.233	-.168	.281	.504	.460	.405	.397	.457	(.95)	.323	.393
11. Area Manager Trust	4.30	1.91	68	.237	-.251	-.292	.358	.554	-.010	.319	.335	.580	.323	(.98)	.765
12. Division Manager Trust	4.20	2.03	70	.308	-.292	-.254	.427	.650	.206	.436	.497	.721	.393	.765	(.98)

¹ Correlations greater than .235 are significant at $p < .05$.

² Reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) are on the diagonal instead of 1's.

Table 2. Regression Summary for the Prediction of Coworker Trust

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable	\hat{B}	t	Model R^2	Model ΔR^2	F for R^2 Change
Step 1	Intercept	6.709	6.207*			
	Work Area	-.330	-1.205			
	Supervisory Status	.748	1.529			
	Gender	-.823	-1.682	.109	.109	2.683
Step 2	Intercept	3.310	2.318*			
	Work Area	-.220	-.894			
	Supervisory Status	.699	1.590			
	Gender	-.316	-.711			
	Job Satisfaction	-.115	-.740			
	Organizational Trust	.415	2.806*			
	Workgroup Cohesion	.289	2.408*	.359	.250	8.180*
Step 3	Intercept	2.403	1.607			
	Work Area	-.177	-.692			
	Supervisory Status	.635	1.411			
	Gender	-.390	-.882			
	Job Satisfaction	-.214	-1.280			
	Organizational Trust	.231	1.288			
	Workgroup Cohesion	.295	2.381*			
	Acceptance of Change	.271	1.758			
	Willingness to Change	.008	.045			
	Cynicism about Change	.188	.937	.412	.054	1.835

Note: * indicates t and F for ΔR^2 are significant at $p. < .05$.

Table 3. Regression Summary for the Prediction of Work Area Manager Trust

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable	\hat{B}	t	Model R^2	Model ΔR^2	F for R^2 Change
Step 1	Intercept	7.753	5.890*			
	Work Area	-.716	-2.121*			
	Supervisory Status	1.071	1.669			
	Gender	-1.096	-1.783	.169	.169	4.328*
Step 2	Intercept	3.148	2.000			
	Work Area	-.255	-.921			
	Supervisory Status	.999	1.910			
	Gender	-.549	-1.087			
	Job Satisfaction	.269	1.567			
	Organizational Trust	.901	5.490*			
	Workgroup Cohesion	-.512	-3.877*	.503	.335	13.691*
Step 3	Intercept	2.876	1.742			
	Work Area	-.321	-1.104			
	Supervisory Status	.904	1.711			
	Gender	-.549	-1.083			
	Job Satisfaction	.124	.669			
	Organizational Trust	.642	3.132*			
	Workgroup Cohesion	-.462	-3.369*			
	Acceptance of Change	.068	.396			
	Willingness to Change	-.081	-.404			
	Cynicism about Change	.470	2.063*	.544	.041	1.717

Note: * indicates t and F for ΔR^2 are significant at $p < .05$.

The results of the analysis of work area manager trust are summarized in Table 3. The initial step of the regression analysis suggests that there are some differences in the perceptions of work area manager trust based on the work area of the respondents, $F(3,64) = 13.681$, $p < .001$. No other individual difference variable was a significant predictor. In the next step, as in the analysis of coworker trust, the prediction of work area manager trust was predicted by organizational trust and workgroup cohesion, $F(6,61) = 20.408$, $p < .001$. This analysis revealed that workgroup cohesion was negatively related to work area manager trust suggesting that for one or more of the work areas, workgroup cohesion decreases as trust increases. For the final step of this analysis, Table 3 shows that cynicism about change also predicted work area manager trust, and that the overall model was statistically significant, $F(9,58) = 14.701$, $p < .001$. However, the addition of cynicism

about change did not significantly increase the variance accounted for by the model over those variables that were entered previously.

The third analysis, the prediction of division manager trust, is summarized in Table 4. The first step of the regression analysis was statistically significant, $F(3,66) = 19.552$, $p < .001$. Here, both supervisory status and gender were predictive of division manager trust. In the next step of the analysis, the addition of job satisfaction, organizational trust, and workgroup cohesion also improved overall prediction, $F(6,63) = 12.713$, $p < .001$. Table 4 also shows that with the inclusion of the additional predictors, supervisory status remained in the equation but gender did not. As found in the analysis of work area manager trust, the relationship between division manager trust and workgroup cohesion is negative. In the final step of this analysis, the overall model is statistically significant, $F(9,60) = 12.448$, $p < .001$, but of the predictors

Table 4. Regression Summary for the Prediction of Division Manager Trust

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable	\hat{B}	t	Model R^2	Model ΔR^2	F for R^2 Change
Step 1	Intercept	7.932	5.827*			
	Work Area	-.681	-1.973			
	Supervisory Status	1.437	2.332*			
	Gender	-1.337	-2.170*	.205	.205	5.683*
Step 2	Intercept	1.741	1.089			
	Work Area	-.235	-.855			
	Supervisory Status	1.388	2.822*			
	Gender	-.500	-1.005			
	Job Satisfaction	.203	1.163			
	Organizational Trust	.997	6.020*			
	Workgroup Cohesion	-.270	-2.009*	.548	.342	15.896*
Step 3	Intercept	.757	.492			
	Work Area	-.232	-.885			
	Supervisory Status	1.020	2.205*			
	Gender	-.620	-1.365			
	Job Satisfaction	-.061	-.358			
	Organizational Trust	.557	3.027*			
	Workgroup Cohesion	-.235	-1.848			
	Acceptance of Change	.192	1.209			
	Willingness to Change	.058	.312			
	Cynicism about Change	.684	3.315*	.651	.104	5.939*

Note: * indicates t and F for ΔR^2 are significant at $p < .05$.

added in this step only cynicism about change is significantly related to division manager trust. With the addition of cynicism about change, workgroup cohesion drops out of the model, leaving only supervisory status and organizational trust from the previous steps. It is important to note that the final step also significantly increased the variance accounted for, suggesting that cynicism about change is a predictor of trust in upper management.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to determine if cynicism about change and trust could be empirically distinguished. The ability to differentially predict trust based on the hierarchical level of the organization supports this contention. As anticipated, cynicism about change significantly improved the prediction of trust in upper-level management only. Cynicism about change did not improve the prediction of

coworker or work area manager trust. This result suggests that employees make distinctions among the organizational groups that they trust and toward whom they direct their cynicism.

This study has several strengths. First, the predictor measures were obtained on a survey six months prior to the collection of the three criterion measures of trust. In addition, a generic measure of organizational trust that was found to be highly correlated with the measure of cynicism regarding change used here was also used as a predictor. Had these been redundant measures, it is likely that the cynicism measure would not have entered any of the equations nor accounted for any additional variance. Also, the study utilized measures of trust that focused on distinct groups within the organization, rather than using a single measure of organizational trust.

This study also has several weaknesses. First, the only measure of cynicism was a measure of cynicism regarding change. Additional measures of cynicism

may have led to different conclusions, and should be examined in future research. In addition, although they were separated by time, the study still relied on survey measures. Even with the use of separate surveys, the threat of mono-method bias still exists. Other assessments of cynicism, such as peer or supervisory ratings in addition to self-ratings of cynicism, may be useful in future research.

While this study provides support for the distinction between cynicism and trust, additional research is needed. For example, clarification is needed regarding the expectation and frustration cycle and its relationship to the development of cynicism and distrust. The process involved in this cycle may be different than those proposed. Alternatively, there may be a temporal component involved in the expectation and frustration cycle. For instance, over a relatively shorter period of time, unmet expectations may lead to distrust for specific attitude objects. The formation of distrust may continue to evolve, and based on the repetition of the cycle, eventually develop into cynicism. Longitudinal research that tracks new hires and assesses the development of trust or cynicism or both may help to clarify the processes involved in the expectation and frustration cycle.

This study also has implications for employees at various levels of an organization involved in an organizational change. Specifically, the results suggest that if there is widespread cynicism about some organizational change effort, this cynicism is not due only to mistrust. Indeed, coworker and work area manager trust were not predicted by cynicism about change. Instead, workgroup cohesion was the strongest predictor of both coworker and work area manager trust. Interestingly, workgroup cohesion is a negative predictor of work area manager and division manager trust. This finding suggests that increasing mistrust (or decreasing trust) of work area and division managers is related to greater cohesion in the workgroup. Stated another way, mistrust of management tends to be related to increasing workgroup cohesion. Such solidarity may be used to resist the organizational change. Finally, the results suggest that prior to an organizational change, management may want to determine both the level of trust that exists in the workplace as well as the level of employee cynicism. Examining both of these issues may lead to separate efforts to prepare for and successfully accomplish the larger change effort.

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