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Unrequited: Asymmetry in Interorganizational Trust

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**UNREQUITED:
ASYMMETRY IN INTERORGANIZATIONAL TRUST**

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Forthcoming in Strategic Organization

ABSTRACT

Many studies of interorganizational relationships assume that trust between organizations is symmetric. In this essay, we explore the origins of this assumption and examine relevant quantitative and qualitative evidence from the literatures on strategy, marketing, supply chain management and information systems. We conclude that no systematic evidence currently exists to support the assumption that interorganizational trust is typically symmetric. We explore how the possibility of asymmetry complicates interpretation of previous research on the effects of interorganizational trust. We encourage further research to identify conditions under which symmetry is likely, and offer a variety of strategies that scholars may use to deal with potential asymmetry.

Interorganizational relationships such as alliances, joint ventures, supply chain partnerships and mergers and acquisitions have attracted attention from scholars in a variety of fields, including strategy, organization theory, marketing, operations, and information systems. In order to understand these complex relationships, scholars have paid particular attention to the role of trust. Trust refers to the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based upon positive expectations of its intentions or behavior (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer, 1998) and is often seen to encompass a competence-based and an integrity-based dimension (e.g., Malhotra and Lumineau, 2011; Connelly et al., 2018). Trust between organizations is a burgeoning research area, with scholars examining its antecedents (Zhong et al., 2017), development processes (Schilke and Cook, 2013), and consequences (Connelly et al., 2018).

Scholars have often implicitly or explicitly assumed that trust in interorganizational relationships is symmetric, conveniently enabling researchers to use archival data or single-informant surveys to study dyadic relationships. Recently, doubt has crept in regarding the soundness of this approach. Lumineau and Oliveira (2018) described a “single party blind spot” in the literature on interorganizational relationships, criticizing the practice of “projecting known information about a party into an area not known (e.g., the other party or the whole dyad).” Similarly, an editorial in the supply chain management literature argued, “the quality of a buyer-supplier relationship cannot be adequately addressed by just the buyer or the supplier” (Flynn, Pagell and Fugate, 2018: 3). Nevertheless, given the challenges of dyadic data collection, single-sided data sets remain pervasive in studies of interorganizational trust. Like other studies of interorganizational relationships, “most (if not all) recent trust papers” have collected data from only one side of the partnership (Villena, Choi and Revilla, forthcoming). The result is that

single-sided data collection is justified based on an assumption of symmetry, yet this assumption remains largely untested because of the prevalence of single-sided data.

In this essay, we address this quandary by examining the plausibility and potential consequences of assuming that interorganizational trust is symmetric. First, we examine how the assumption of symmetry became widely accepted in the literature on interorganizational trust. We show that early findings were overlooked or selectively cited, until symmetry became taken-for-granted in the literature. Second, we examine the totality of the evidence regarding asymmetry in interorganizational trust. We take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon relevant research in organizational theory, strategy, supply chain management, marketing, and management information systems. Our focus on interorganizational relationships complements recent calls for better understanding of trust asymmetry in *intraorganizational* settings (Korsgaard, Brower and Lester, 2015). Our review reveals a notable lack of evidence to support the assumption of trust symmetry in interorganizational relationships, leading us to our third step: exploring how the possibility of asymmetry complicates interpretation of the existing body of literature on interorganizational trust. Finally, we develop recommendations for how scholars may deal with the possibility of asymmetry when studying interorganizational trust. Our intention here is not to develop a theory of asymmetry - indeed, we argue that armchair theorizing has led the field astray. Instead, we argue that gathering further empirical evidence is the way forward, and we offer suggestions for how to conduct reliable research on interorganizational trust, even if such trust may be unrequited.

How did we get here? The symmetry assumption and one-sided data collection

Conceptual articles about interorganizational relationships have long assumed that trust is mutual. Ring and Van de Ven (1994: 110) theorized that trust is “a cumulative product of repeated past interactions” that leads to “a common understanding of mutual commitments.” Das and Teng (1998) argued that trust development is inherently reciprocal. Moreover, Jeffries and Reed (2000: 875) suggested asymmetric dyads would be rare and fleeting: “Whereas matching trust dyads are stable, ones in which there is no match are both unlikely and unstable.”

Yet despite the logical appeal of these arguments, empirical support for trust symmetry in interorganizational relationships has been scarce from the start. In an early study, John and Reve (1982) collected dyadic data on wholesaler-retailer relationships, asking each party to rate “the degree to which transactions within the dyad are based on mutual trust” (p. 518). The correlation in ratings across the dyad was only 0.166. The authors concluded, “[I]t is reasonable to expect differences in perceptions among the actors. After all, wholesalers and retailers have very different roles and functions in the distribution system” (p. 523). They also noted that symmetry was more likely to occur for structural variables such as degree of formalization, and less likely for sentiment variables such as trust. Campbell (1997) surveyed packaging industry firms and their customers, asking each respondent to assess the degree of mutual trust in the relationship (e.g., “We can always rely on each other when it counts”). The correlation between supplier and customer ratings was statistically insignificant. Taken together, these early studies provided reason to doubt the assumption of symmetry in interorganizational trust.

Surprisingly, subsequent research often overlooked the conclusions of these two studies, while research that addressed trust asymmetry more tangentially – or not at all – became heavily cited. As an illustration, we consider three references that are regularly used to support one-

sided data collection in interorganizational trust research: Heide and John (1990), Anderson and Narus (1990), and Zaheer et al. (1998). Heide and John (1990) measured buyers' and suppliers' perceptions of several dimensions of their relationships. Notably, the dimensions they measured did not include trust. Moreover, the authors found that relationship perceptions were not symmetric across the dyad, concluding, "We find that buyers and suppliers not only have different incentives for developing close relationships, but that their approaches to developing alliances may differ...This asymmetry must be taken into account in practice" (1990: 34).

Anderson and Narus (1990) collected interorganizational trust data from manufacturers and their distributors. However, their study analyzed the manufacturer and distributor data in separate models and did not report any statistical test of agreement across the dyad. Furthermore, comparisons across the manufacturer and distributor models found differences in the antecedents and consequences of trust for these two groups. Finally, Zaheer et al. (1998) collected data from only one side of the dyad (buyers). Their study was aimed at examining the degree of consensus *within* the organization, and did not provide any data on the level of agreement *between* organizations.

In short, none of these three articles provides evidence of symmetry in interorganizational trust. Nevertheless, these studies have often been cited in support of single-sided data collection. Lui and Ngo (2004) referenced Anderson and Narus (1990) and Zaheer et al. (1998) as providing "evidence that perceptions of exchange are consistent across partners" (p. 483). Ebers and Semrau (2015: 421) cited all three papers, stating that "buyers and suppliers overall have consistent perceptions of their exchange relationships (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Zaheer et al., 1998)" and that single informants "can provide reliable and valid information (Heide and John, 1990)." Similarly, Revilla and Knoppen (2015) cited Anderson and Narus (1990) and Zaheer et

al. (1998) as examples of previous work indicating that “buyers and suppliers overall have consistent perceptions regarding their exchange relationships” (p. 1417).

Our goal here is not to single out individual scholars (indeed, we are simply offering a few illustrations of a common practice), but rather to explain how a reliance on one-sided measures of interorganizational trust became taken-for-granted in the literature. An example of this taken-for-grantedness comes from Brinkhoff, Özer and Sargut (2015), who explained, “we interviewed one partner organization for each dyad... While nonreciprocal data may not be seen as an ideal alternative, its use is common in social sciences” (p. 188). Similarly, single-sided data collection has been justified as following “the overwhelming majority” of prior studies of interorganizational relationships (Lui and Ngo, 2004: 476), as being “in line with accepted practice” (Revilla and Knoppen, 2015: 1426) and as being a practice “in common with most large-sample studies on inter-organizational relationships” (Corsten et al., 2011: 558).

The net result of this reliance on single-sided data collection is that the assumption of symmetry has remained largely untested. In the next section, we assemble the available evidence to assess whether symmetry is indeed a viable assumption in studies of interorganizational trust.

Direct evidence of (a)symmetry in interorganizational trust

In order to assess the evidence for trust symmetry we drew from a range of literatures, including strategy, marketing, operations and supply chain management, international business and management information systems. We considered direct evidence from quantitative and qualitative studies of interorganizational trust, as well as indirect evidence from research on trust antecedents.

Quantitative evidence

As noted above, very few studies of interorganizational trust have included data from both parties in the dyad (Zhong et al., 2017). Even those studies that have included dyadic data typically provide little insight into the degree of symmetry between the parties (e.g., Anderson and Narus, 1990; Ganesan, 1994; Jap and Anderson, 2003; Malhotra and Lumineau, 2011). Some authors report tests comparing mean trust levels across respondent categories (e.g., Ambrose et al., 2010; Liu, Luo and Liu, 2009). However, t-tests are of limited value in assessing symmetry since buyers and sellers could collectively display the same average level of trust even if every matched buyer-seller dyad is asymmetric.

The handful of studies that have reported correlations in interorganizational trust across matched partners have had widely diverging results. John and Reve (1982) and Campbell (1997) reported dyadic correlations of 0.166 and 0.27, respectively. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Cullen, Johnson and Sakano (2000) examined strategic alliances between Japanese and US firms, reporting cross-dyad correlations of 0.76 for credibility trust (similar to competence) and 0.83 for benevolence trust. Selnes and Sallis (2003) found a correlation of 0.53 for vendor and customer trust. Fang, Palmatier, Scheer and Li (2008) measured trust in international joint ventures located in China, finding an correlation of 0.64 across partners. Klein and Rai (2009) surveyed a logistics provider and its clients, and found a correlation of 0.4 in their trusting beliefs. Most recently, McEvily, Zaheer and Fudge Kamal (2017) found the correlation between manufacturer and supplier trust was 0.351 at the firm level, and 0.012 at the interpersonal level.

Like trust research more broadly (McEvily and Tortoriello, 2011; Seppanen, Blomqvist and Sundqvist, 2007; Zhong et al., 2017), the studies just reviewed used a range of different

measures and observed different types of interorganizational relationships, making comparisons difficult. Several of the studies captured multiple dimensions of trust within the same measure. These include reliability and benevolence (Fang et al., 2008); ability, integrity and benevolence (Klein and Rai, 2009); reliability, predictability and fairness (McEvily, Zaheer and Fudge Kamal, 2017); and competence and general trustworthiness (Selnes and Sallis, 2003). Some studies (Selnes and Sallis, 2003; Klein and Rai, 2009; McEvily et al., 2017) framed their survey items in a unidirectional manner (e.g., “Supplier/Buyer X is trustworthy”), while Fang et al. (2008) framed items in terms of mutual trust (e.g., “Both partners’ parent companies trust each other”), and Campbell (1997) used a mixture of unidirectional and mutual questions (“This supplier will work hard in the future to maintain a close relationship with my company,” “We can always rely on each other when it counts.”) Given this heterogeneity, it is difficult to identify the factors that lead to trust asymmetry or to assess whether some trust dimensions are more symmetric than others. However, at minimum, the quantitative evidence indicates that interorganizational trust is not consistently symmetric.

Qualitative evidence

Qualitative studies have also found mixed evidence regarding symmetry in interorganizational trust. Fine-grained case studies by Larson (1992) and Uzzi (1997) described buyer-supplier relationships characterized by mutual trust developed through gradual, reciprocal processes of risk-taking. Yet Larson also noted that such relationships were atypical, describing them as “unusual in their high levels of collaboration and cooperation” (1992: 80).

Other qualitative research has observed instances of asymmetric interorganizational trust. In a study of international joint ventures, Gill and Butler (2003) found that the partner firms

attended to different events and information in forming assessments of their counterparts' trustworthiness. For example, higher-than-expected start-up costs negatively impacted trust levels for a British firm, but not for its Japanese partner. Conversely, the Japanese firm's trust suffered when managers observed that their proprietary technology was being used outside the joint venture, in other parts of the British partner's business. British executives did not recognize or reciprocate this reduction in trust. In fact, they "proudly drew attention to the major improvements in [the British firm's] operations due to learning from the Japanese" (p. 556). This behavior underscores the differences in perspective between the partners.

In their case study of an alliance between a biotechnology venture and a large pharmaceutical firm, de Rond and Bouchikhi (2004) traced a dialectical process that involved phases of both symmetric and asymmetric trust. In one episode, initially symmetric trust became imbalanced when the larger firm hired a key scientist away from the smaller partner. The larger firm believed that hiring the scientist was preferable to having him leave the alliance altogether. However, the biotech firm's leaders interpreted the situation as a deliberate trust violation, and from their perspective "trust broke down" (p. 63). The event points to asymmetric information and conflicting interpretations of partner behavior as potential antecedents to asymmetric trust. The same study also notes that trust may be symmetric across some parts of both organizations, yet asymmetric in other organizational units.

In a comparative case study analysis of eight acquisitions of entrepreneurial firms, Graebner (2009) also observed trust asymmetry. Because target firm leaders knew that they would lose power after being acquired, they screened out potential buyers that they did not trust. Buyers did not have the same reservations about dealing with distrusted targets. As a result, when acquisition discussions began, most target firm leaders trusted their buyers but most buyers

distrusted their targets. This asymmetry increased during the negotiation process as sellers viewed their ongoing interactions through the lens of a deepening personal relationship, while buyers viewed the same events as part of a competitive bargaining process. While some parties correctly identified the presence of asymmetric trust, many did not. This calls into question the ability of one-sided data collection to assess accurately the presence of trust asymmetry.

Lander and Kooning (2013) observed trust asymmetry during the negotiation phase of a merger between Air France and KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. They identified three domains of trust, pertaining to negotiation process, negotiation outcomes, and personal interactions. Trust asymmetry emerged regarding negotiation outcomes because KLM continued partnership talks with British Airways at the same time as negotiating with Air France. Trust asymmetry regarding the negotiation process emerged as a result of KLM's complex governance structure, which forced its CEO to reopen issues that Air France had thought were resolved. Negotiations continued despite these asymmetries, because trust in the personal domain compensated for process and outcome-related concerns. The authors concluded that periods of trust asymmetry in one domain can be tolerated if trust exists in other domains.

Indirect evidence: Antecedents of trust

Research about the antecedents of interorganizational trust also offers insights about the plausibility of trust asymmetry. Social embeddedness theory suggests that interorganizational trust is fostered by pre-existing ties and shared third-party relationships (Larson, 1992; Uzzi, 1997). These precursors prime the relationship for acts of reciprocity that gradually build trust. Following this logic, several studies in the networks literature have even used the number of

prior ties (Gulati, 1995) or the length of their current relationship (Uzzi, 1999; Uzzi and Lancaster, 2004) as proxies for embeddedness and/or trust.

Since the proposed antecedents of embedded relationships (presence of pre-existing ties, presence of shared third-party ties, and relationship duration) are symmetric across the dyad, to the extent that these factors predict trust, we would expect trust to also be symmetric. However, the developmental processes observed in social embeddedness research may characterize only a minority of interorganizational relationships. A growing body of evidence suggests that neither relationship duration (Young-Ybarra and Wiersema, 1999; Poppo et al., 2008; Gulati and Sytch, 2008; Vanneste, Puranam and Kretschmer, 2014; Zong et al., 2017) nor the presence of prior ties between the firms (Lui and Ngo, 2004; Young-Ybarra and Wiersema, 1999) are in fact reliable predictors of trust. Shared ties with third parties have complex effects, and may even increase the probability of withdrawal from an interorganizational relationship (Greve, Baum, Mitsuhashi and Rowley, 2010). Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that individuals' perceptions of their interorganizational networks are often flawed (Knoben, Oerlemans, Krijkamp, and Provan, 2018). The members of a dyad may not share the same perceptions of whether they have common third-party ties, leading to divergent levels of trust.

As noted earlier, some scholars have theorized that asymmetric dyads will be unstable and short-lived (Jeffries and Reed, 2000). This argument suggests that relationship duration does not predict absolute levels of trust, but does predict the level of agreement across the dyad. Whether longer relationships have a greater degree of trust symmetry is ultimately an empirical question that will require additional studies. However, it is interesting that most of the relationships studied by Campbell (1997) were more than 11 years in duration, and those studied by McEvily et al. (2017) averaged 6 years in duration, yet both studies reported low correlations

of trust ratings across the dyad. Interorganizational relationships may endure because of high switching costs, investments in specific assets, risk of hold-up, inertia, or because the partner has a monopolistic position (Lumineau and Henderson, 2012; Gulati and Sych, 2007). None of these explanations would necessarily increase trust symmetry over time.

Other antecedents of interorganizational trust have varying (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Ganesan, 1994; Johnson et al., 1996) or even opposing effects on trust on either side of the dyad, depending on each firm's role (e.g., buyer vs. seller). For example, McEvily, Zaheer and Fudge Kamal (2017) found that a buyer's exchange hazard was positively related to a supplier's trust in that buyer, but negatively related to the buyer's trust in that supplier. Finally, even if the structure of trust antecedents were the same for both firms, studies have identified several antecedents that could reasonably be expected to have different values for the two firms. These include the firms' nationalities (e.g., Ertug et al., 2013), dependence on the other firm (Zhong et al., 2017), cultural sensitivity (Johnson et al., 1996), and reputation for environmental responsibility (Norheim-Hansen, 2015). In sum, the literature on the antecedents of interorganizational trust provides little reassurance regarding symmetry across the dyad.

Implications

Up until this point, we have argued that interorganizational trust may be asymmetric in many situations. We now consider the implications of this claim. From a theoretical viewpoint, the existence of trust asymmetry calls for a more nuanced conceptualization of interorganizational trust and a more sophisticated understanding of how trust between organizations develops. From an empirical viewpoint, the possibility of asymmetry introduces new interpretations for the findings of previous research. As one example, consider research on

the effects of trust on relationship-specific investments. Corsten, Gruen and Peyinghaus (2011) found no relationship between a supplier's trust in a buyer and the supplier's relationship-specific investments, while Ebers and Semrau (2015) found that a buyer's trust in a supplier did increase the supplier's share of specific investments. If we assume that trust is symmetric, these findings could be viewed as conflicting, with Corsten et al. (2011) providing evidence that trust does not influence relationship-specific investment and Ebers and Semrau (2015) providing evidence that it does. Yet if we allow for the possibility that trust is asymmetric, we might draw a different conclusion: firm A's trust in firm B influences firm B's relationship-specific investments, but firm B's trust in firm A does not.

The possibility of asymmetry also raises questions about potential differences between the effects of absolute level of trust and the effects of the degree of trust symmetry. For example, consider Gulati and Sytch's (2007) finding that no significant relationship exists between a manufacturer's trust in its supplier and the degree of information exchange in the relationship. This result could mean that trust simply does not influence information sharing. However, an alternate explanation is that the degree of trust symmetry, rather than either party's individual level of trust, predicts information sharing. Indeed, a meta-analysis of trust at the interpersonal level provides some evidence that mutual trust has stronger effects than unidirectional trust on information-sharing behavior (Kong, Dirks and Ferrin, 2014). Yet without knowing whether trust was symmetric in Gulati and Sytch's sample, we cannot know which interpretation is more valid.

The question of trust levels vs. degree of symmetry similarly complicates our understanding of the effects of different dimensions of trust. A meta-analysis by Connelly et al. (2018) found that integrity-based trust has a larger impact than competence-based trust on

reducing ex post transaction costs in interorganizational relationships. This could be interpreted as indicating that transaction costs fundamentally depend more upon parties' integrity than their competence. However, other interpretations are plausible if we believe that trust can be asymmetric. It is possible that integrity-based trust is more frequently symmetric than competence-based trust, or vice versa. If the former is true, then the underlying reason that integrity-based trust has larger effects on reducing transaction costs could simply be that symmetric trust has stronger effects than asymmetric trust.

The possibility of trust asymmetry also raises complex issues related to research design, including how to address common method bias. One solution for common method concerns is to measure independent variables by surveying one side of a relationship, and dependent variables by surveying the other side. Yet if trust is asymmetric, this approach could actually obscure important relationships. For example, Roh, Whipple and Boyer (2013) showed that the effects of interorganizational trust on relationship satisfaction were significant when independent and dependent variables came from the same side of the dyad, but not when trust was measured from one side of the dyad (e.g., supplier) and relationship satisfaction from the other (e.g., buyer). Supplier trust influenced buyer satisfaction only when the two firms were in agreement about the level of trust in the relationship, i.e. when trust was symmetric. Had those authors measured trust from one side of the dyad, and relationship satisfaction from the other side, they would have eliminated common method concerns but erroneously concluded that trust does not influence relationship satisfaction.

Research strategies

As just described, unmeasured trust asymmetry may have important conceptual and empirical consequences for researchers. We now turn to potential strategies for dealing with this issue.

Dyadic data

The obvious solution to the many questions regarding trust asymmetry is to conduct more studies with data from both sides of the interorganizational relationship and to report the level of agreement across the dyad. Notwithstanding statements that collecting dyadic data presents an “overwhelming task” (Katsikeas, Skarmeas and Bello, 2009: 149), a number of authors have succeeded in collecting such data sets. However, the sample size tends to be small. Even research on *intraorganizational* trust has relied heavily upon single-sided data (Krasikova and LeBreton, 2012; Korsgaard, Brower and Lester, 2014), and collecting data from both sides of interorganizational relationships is even more daunting. In general, sample sizes tend to decrease by 50% or more when studies are conducted at the organizational vs. individual level (Shen et al., 2011). Samples in prior interorganizational trust research have ranged from 52 dyads (Ganesan, 1994) to 315 (Selnes and Sallis, 2003), with most samples numbering between 80 and 130 dyads (Perrone, Zaheer and McEvily, 2003; Johnson et al., 1996; Nyaga et al., 2013; Klein & Rai, 2009; John & Reve, 1982; Ambrose, Marshall & Lynch, 2010; Fang et al., 2008; Smith & Barclay, 1997; Roh, Whipple & Boyer, 2013; McEvily, Zaheer and Fudge Kamal, 2017; Villena & Craighead, 2017). It is particularly difficult to gather a sufficient sample of dyadic responses when conducting longitudinal research, which requires repeated waves of surveys.

As one way to increase sample size, some researchers have collected data from one or a few large firms on one side of the relationship. For example, in Nyaga et al. (2013), all respondents from the buyer side came from a single high-tech firm, and in Jap and Anderson (2003), all buyer respondents came from four Fortune 500 firms. Such designs may make data collection more manageable and as well as controlling for firm-specific effects. However, they raise important questions of external validity.

Dyadic data collection may also raise confidentiality concerns that generate biased responses. For instance, suppliers may not want to disclose sensitive information which may be used against them by buyers. In addition, dyadic samples may be biased toward highly-functioning relationships, especially if one party selects the counterpart to be surveyed (e.g., Liu, Luo and Liu, 2009), or even asks the counterpart to participate (e.g., Selnes and Sallis, 2003). Fortunately, remedies are available for these problems. To identify whether biases are present in answers to sensitive questions, surveys can include perceptual questions regarding confidentiality and social desirability issues (e.g., Couper et al., 2008). To overcome sample selection biases with matched dyads, the focal firm can rank order their exchange counterparts, with the researcher then randomly selecting an exchange partner from this list (Klein and Rai, 2009; McEvily et al., 2017).

Other research strategies

Despite researchers' best efforts, it may be very difficult to collect dyadic responses for certain data sets. An alternative in these cases is a close examination of a subsample. Poppo, Zhou and Li (2016) collected dyadic data for a small sample of 28 buyer-supplier relationships, and found a correlation of 0.82 for buyer and supplier ratings of relational trust. This increases

confidence in their larger, one-sided data set. Of course, it is important to ensure that such subsamples are representative of the entire data set. Other authors have conducted dyadic interviews to supplement one-sided surveys (e.g., Dyer and Chu, 2000; 2003). Dyer and Chu reported that in their preliminary interviews, “there were no instances where the perceptions of suppliers and automakers were dramatically different (2003: 67).” Greater transparency regarding such interview data, such as including illustrative quotes from both sides of a relationship that indicate similar levels of trust, would help to further increase confidence.

In addition, scholars can be careful to match their theory to their measures (Heide and John, 1995). If a study involves data from only one party, its theoretical development, hypotheses and conclusions should be framed to reflect one-sided measures. Villena, Choi and Revilla (forthcoming) provide a recent example of a one-sided study that explicitly adopts the buyer’s perspective, and develops theory and measures accordingly. Similarly, Perrone et al. (2003) explicitly focus on the supplier’s perspective. In addition to specifying whose perspective is being taken, scholars should also be careful to indicate whether their measures are intended to reflect one party’s trust in another, or one party’s assessment of the degree of mutual trust in the relationship. If trust is asymmetric, these may be two very different things.

Finally, researchers can consider alternatives to survey methods. A number of approaches have been used to study other aspects of interorganizational relationships and could be adapted to studying trust. These methods include experiments (e.g., Ro, Su and Chen, 2016), formal models (e.g., Panico, 2017), simulations (e.g., Sting et al., forthcoming), and content analysis of archival data (e.g., Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). We also believe the field has much to gain from additional qualitative studies (Graebner, Martin and Roundy, 2012).

Conclusion

Our purpose in this essay was to critically examine the assumption of symmetry in interorganizational trust research. We were motivated by observing that the vast majority of studies of interorganizational trust use single-sided data to represent a dyadic construct. Our review suggests that assuming symmetric trust across the dyad is problematic. Ultimately questions about the prevalence and consequences of asymmetry in interorganizational trust must be answered by systematic collection and comparison of dyadic data. However, recognizing the difficulty of such a data collection effort, we have also suggested several more modest steps that researchers can take.

More broadly, our examination of trust asymmetry highlights the importance of probing assumptions that have become taken-for-granted in particular research domains. Despite the challenges of questioning established beliefs, we hope that our discussion of trust asymmetry has shown the value of such an endeavor for advancing our understanding of interorganizational relationships and other organizational phenomena.

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