WHAT IS TRUST?
COMPARING EUROPEAN AND TURKISH STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract: This study aims to enhance the understanding of trust which seems to be a confusing subject. Although trust seems to be a more related topic with psychology or sociology literature, it has also turned to be a growing subject in organizational research.

In this research, the notion of trust that is always mentioned as an "intangible", "confusing", and "hard to define" is explored. Within this endeavor, two focus groups which have aimed to reveal students' perception about trust and its importance is presented. One of these focus groups is conducted with Turkish students and the other one is conducted with European students. Both of the groups consist of Erasmus students who have come to Denmark as exchange students to study for a term.

Keywords: Trust, Focus group.

GÜVEN NEDİR? AVRUPALI VE TÜRK ÖĞRENCİLERİN ALGILARININ KARŞILAŞTIRILMASI

Özet: Bu araştırma karmaşık bir kavram olan "güven" in idrakini arttırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Güven her ne kadar Sosyoloji ve psikoloji alanlarının konusu gibi gözükse de, son dönemlerde yönetim yazınında gittikçe artan bir önem kazanmaktadır.

Bu araştırma kapsamında "soyut", "karmaşık" ve "tanımlanması zor" olarak nitelendirilmiş olan güven kavramı incelenmiştir. Bu araştırma, öğrencilerin güven kavramına ve önemine ilişkin algılarını ortaya koymayı amaçlayan iki odak grup incelemesini içermektedir. Bu odak gruplardan biri Türk öğrencilerle, diğeri ise Avrupalı öğrenciler ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Her iki grup da, Erasmus öğrenci değişim programı kapsamında Danimarka'ya gelen öğrencilerden oluşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Güven, Odak grup.

I. Introduction

There appears to be widespread agreement on the importance of trust in human conduct, but unfortunately there also appears to be equally widespread lack of agreement on a suitable definition of the concept [1]. There have been also some inconsistencies in the conceptualization and measurement of trust in previous research [2].

It should be considered that trust is a socio-psychological phenomena and it has lots of dimensions. From a psychological point of view, Costa and McCrae (1992) explored trust within the Big Five Model and considered it as a part of the individual character. They conceptualized it as a component of agreeableness *(Agreeableness is as an individual difference in the motivation to maintain positive interpersonal relations with others. These people are described as being warm, kind, cooperative, unselfish, considerate and trusting* [3]*)*

Rotter (1980) also defined trust as a stable individual characteristic [4].

In this context trust is defined to be person specific, permanent and resistant to experience and information.

In contrast with this approach, some other researchers suggested trust to be based on lifetime experience with two parties who are the trustee and the trustor. For example Noteboom [5], stated that trust is constituted from a subject and an object. Subject trusts the object. Subject of trust could be people, organizations, institutions or socio-economic systems and all of these subjects are interrelated. For example trust in people will affect the trust in institutions or trust in systems will affect trust in people [5].

In this context trust is relation based and is something that is communicated.

In organizational research the effects of information and experience on trust is also examined and a strong positive relationship between these two variables is observed [2,6].

In this context trust is something rational that is learned and calculated.

Gill at.al. [2] and Dirks & Ferrin [7] suggested that relation between personality characteristics and behavior is moderated by the strength of the situation. Gill at.al. [2] considered this factor as an important issue for understanding and predicting behaviors.

According to Mischell (1977), situations can be characterized along a continuum from strong to weak. Strong situations have salient behavioral cues that lead everyone to interpret the circumstances similarly, and induce uniform expectations regarding the appropriate response. For example, one would expect that most people would be serious and somber while attending a funeral. Thus, strong situations are said to suppress the expression of individual differences. Weak situations, on the other hand, have highly ambiguous behavioral cues that provide few constraints on behavior and do not induce uniform expectations. For example, at a social gathering, some individuals will be circulating and meeting new people, whereas others will remain seated and socialize only with acquaintances. In weak situations, the person has considerable discretion in how to respond to the circumstances. Thus, weak situations provide the opportunity for individual differences such as personality to play a greater role in determining behavior [2].

Dyne et. al. [8] also concluded that most individuals in a strong situation construe the situation in the same way and tend to confirm to expectations and norms. Thus, personality constructs generally have little predictive power in a strong situation. In contrast, individual dispositions are more influential in a weak situation [8].

Dirks and Ferrin [7] also suggested that situational strength is a helpful concept for understanding the role of psychological states and traits in impacting workplace outcomes.

In this context trust depends on the situation.

It can be proposed that there are two main different approaches to explain the grounds for trust. First approach considers trust as a result of personality and second considers it a result of relation/experience/situation etc.

II.   DIMENSIONS OF TRUST

As stated earlier trust is a complex concept and its definition is problematic. One of the main difficulties regarding the subject is its multidimensionality nature which makes the concept diffuse. Many researchers focused on different facets and have divided trust into lots of sub-categories.

For example Brenkert [9] named facets of trust as behavioral, predictable and volunteer trust. Dirks and Ferrin [7] also remarked that trust has lots of dimensions like micro-organizational, economic transaction and dynamics of romantic relationships. Lewiki and Bunker (1995) defined dimensions as calculation, information and knowing trust, while Sitkin (1995) has focused on competency, benevolence and value-based trust [10]. Mc Allister [11], categorized trust into two dimensions:

cognitive and affective.

Some researchers have focused on personality characteristics of trustee. For instance Butler (1991) identified conditions of trust as availability, competence, consistency, discreetness, fairness, integrity, loyalty, openness, promise fulfillment and receptivity [12]. Noteboom [5] conceptualized conditions as trust in competency and trust in intention.

III.   DEFINITION OF TRUST

Hosmer [1] discussed some of the discouraging critics about the concept and has stated that although there is a widespread agreement on the importance of trust between academic researchers, business practitioners and consultants, there is also lack of agreement on definition of the concept. He also expressed that trust is a hazy and diffuse topic and although all the endeavors' to define the concept has provided dimensions and boundaries to topic that they could not provide a single definition of the concept. In his article Hosmer [1] has reviewed the various definitions of trust that have been proposed within the context of a) individual expectations, b) interpersonal relationships, c) economic exchanges, d) social structures and e) ethical principles. He has explained that the definition of trust is problematic because there are such a wide variety of approaches to the concept.

In his article, Hosmer [1], aimed to link the trust in organizational theory and philosophical ethics. He has pointed out at goal of Western moral philosophy that is to find the "first principle that could lead to "good" society.

Here Hosmer [1], suggested that "willing to cooperation" and the "ultimate benefit" together show that there is an obvious association between the definition of trust in organizational theory and the concept of the good society in moral philosophy. He has explained that all the normative rules, designed to take the legitimate interest of others into account, were assumed by moral philosophers to encourage greater trust among and improve cooperation between the diverse elements of society and consequently results in "good" for the society. He refered to Baier (1986) who agreed that cooperation was the major theme of moral philosophy and that trust was essential to gain cooperation.

At the end Hosmer [1] concluded that, trust in philosophic ethics is the result of a given decision or action that recognizes and protects the rights and interests of other people through an application of the ethical principles of analysis. These principles focus on what is good for the society rather than on what is good for the individual. Trust in organizational theory is the expectation of a similar behavior that recognizes and protects the interests of other people in order to increase willingness to cooperation. This behavior also expands

ultimate benefits within joint endeavor or economic exchange. The definition of trust that Hosmer [1] has synthesized from the two intellectual traditions are given below:

"Trust is the expectation by one person, group, or firm of ethically justifiable behavior-that is, morally correct decisions and actions based upon ethical principles of analysis-on the part of the other person, group or the firm in a joint endeavor or economic exchange".

In organizational research over 100 definitions of trust can be found in the literature [13]. Some of them are given below.

For example Rotter (1971) defined trust as a *generalized expectancy* to attribute benevolent intent to others and rely on information received from others about uncertain environmental states and their outcomes in a situation involving risk [4].

Rousseau et al. (1998) defined it as a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive *expectations* of the intentions of behavior of others [6].

Mayer, Davis and Schoorman [14] defined trust as *the 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 that other party.* It should be mentioned that Mayer et.al.'s definition of trust has found a great support in literature [15,16].

IV.   WHY DO WE NEED TRUST?

Luhmann (1979), stated that trust is a basic fact of social life and a complete absence of trust would prevent one even from getting up in the morning. According to Luhmann, social life is impossible without trust. Luhmann (1979) and Gidden's (1984, 1990, 1991) suggested that the need for trust has emerged because of modern society and its complexity and uncertainty that it has produced. They argued that trust will broaden possibilities to reduce this complexity [17].

Hardin [18] also has a more sociological view and stated that trust is important because it makes cooperation easier and possible. This cooperation serves mutual benefit and it makes the society last. Just like Luhmann and Giddens, Hardin [18] suggested that the popularity of subject is due to modern society that put an end to small community.

Reynolds [19] also associated trust with modern world and explained that the popularity of trust is as the result of the modern world and the increasing competitive atmosphere.

This view suggests that modern world makes individual isolated and the risks he/she has to take increase and the need to talk about trust arises as a consequence of loosing trust. But the reason why trust got popular, may be is not because we are loosing it, but because we need it more than anytime before. Modern society makes people cooperate with systems and virtual things. For example e-commerce, e-education and virtual teams are also very popular subjects of management. May be in the past people had to trust to what they could see but in modern society they have to trust without seeing the object.

Hence the reason why people need trust may change but the need for trust remains. The understanding of trust starts with understanding the reasons why we need trust. For example Hardin [18] explained that it is reputation and reciprocity that makes people trust each other. Especially in times that people lived a commune life, when someone is not a trustworthy person, everybody would know and would not like to get involve in cooperation with that person. This obviously would make this person weak and vulnerable because in such a society a simple individual is not meant to survive.

V.   WHY TRUST BECAME IMPORTANT IN MANAGEMENT LITERATURE?

As a social construct trust is in the center of the relationships, influencing each party' behavior towards the other. Trust has presented a positive relationship with organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, productivity, information sharing, belief of information, decision commitment and intention to stay [20,21,22].

In this respect Dirks and Ferrin [7], reviewed the management literature about main and moderator effects of trust. They have divided the main effect into two subcategories; 1) workplace behavior and performance outcomes, 2) workplace attitudes and cognitive/perceptual constructs. As the result of their review Dirks and Ferrin [7] stated that the effects of trust on various workplace behaviors and performance outcomes are weaker and less consistent. The effects of trust on organizational citizenship behavior and individual performance seem to have the most promising evidence. They suggest that additional research is needed to better understand the effects of trust particularly on behavioral and performance outcomes.

As moderator effects of trust, they explored how trust might operate in organizational settings. They stated that trust provides the conditions under which

cooperation, higher performance and more positive attitudes and perceptions are likely to occur. They pointed that higher levels of trust, increase the likelihood that determinants of cooperation will actually result in favorable outcomes; lower levels of trust decrease the likelihood.

As the result of their review Dirks and Ferrin [7] concluded that there is empirical support for the idea that trust has important benefits for organizations. But they have stressed that these benefits are not always transmitted in a singular or straightforward manner and the organizational context must be considered as a very important factor.

VI. RESEARCH: METHOD AND RESPONDENTS

The literature review reveals that "trust" has been examined from so many aspects but mostly its effects on desired outcomes have been explored. Despite this attention that has been devoted to trust, the attitudes and concerns of tomorrow's business leaders, today's college students have been neglected. These students are tomorrow's employees and as they came to study abroad today they may work as expatriates in the future. Therefore, understanding their feelings and considerations regarding business environment is very crucial. Besides, according to researchers [3,4] propensity to trust is a stable individual characteristic. Accordingly, this trait is not expected to change easily over time. Thus in this paper, their understanding of trust that is found to have a strong relationship with various organizational outcomes such as commitment and organizational citizenship behavior is explored.

To sum up, the purpose of this investigation is to address college students' perceptions toward trust and it is an exploratory study which tries to reveal if trust is really a subjective notion and if it is really a hard to define concept.

In order to compare literature findings with business students' opinions, focus group method has been applied. As the aim of this study is not to examine a certain relationship between trust and any outcomes but just to provide insights for the concept, focus group was conducted.

The focus group interview is so popular that many research agencies consider it to be the "only" exploratory research tool. A focus group interview is an unstructured, free-flowing interview with a small group of people [23]. Typically, focus groups involve around six to eight people who meet once, for a period of an hour and a half to two hours [24].

Two focus groups that contain business college students were conducted to be able to compare the consistency of literature and also to compare the opinions of Turkish and European students.

Interviews with both groups lasted for an hour.

6 questions prepared by the author were asked to the students. These questions are;

1.What is trust?

2.Is trust related to personality or is it something that is learned from experiences?

3.To whom would you trust?

4.Why is trust important?

5.Why do you think trust is an important factor in management literature?

6.Do you have a special preference related to nationalities while choosing your teammates?

There were 7 Turkish (bachelor) students in the first focus group. In this group there were 3 Business Administration students from 3rd grade; 2 Economics students from 3rd and 4th grade and 2 Industrial Engineering students from 4th grade. The average age for Turkish students is 20. Spoken language for this group was Turkish which is the native language of both students and researcher. This group will be referred as Group 1.

Second group consisted of 6 (bachelor) students from European countries (2 Spanish, 2 Bulgarian, 1 Polish and 1 Latvian). In this group there were 2 Business Administration students from 5th grade; 2 Marketing and Management student from 2nd grade; 2 Industrial Engineering students from 4th grade. The average age for this group is 21. Spoken language for this group was English. This group will be referred as Group 2. Results of the focus groups are represented in Table.1.

Table.1. Results of the Focus Groups

Question	Group 1	Group 2
What is trust?	• To depend on someone • To feel that someone is supportive • To know that someone will catch you if you fall • If you are trustworthy you'll think that others are also trustworthy • A judgment that is result of experience • To be sure that other party will not give harm • Peace of mind	• Safety • Truth • Something built in time • It is a feeling • It is a judgment at first sight
Is trust related to personality or is it something that is learned from experiences?	• When you are a child, you trust everyone • You trust when you don't have enough information • It is related to experience and it decreases by the time, but it differs from person to person • Trust is shaped by experience • It comes from birth and it changes with experiences • It is related to education and environment • By the time passes child learns who is trustworthy • Trust is something that is related to feelings but when we make a decision we are rational	• Experience • Personality • Both experience and personality • Experience can change personality • When you get old, you tend to distrust so it is experience based • When you get old, you need more evidence to trust someone • Old people never trust because they've learned from their experiences not to trust anyone • Trust decision and the effects of knowledge on trust depends on personality • The last destination that all people will come is absolute distrust
To whom would you trust?	• I would trust directly, I don't need anything • If in the crisis time a firm does not fire anyone and instead hires employees then I would trust that firm • To someone who has good intentions • To someone with whom I have no common goals or interests • In my country we do not trust people • To frank people • To honest people • Appearance and first impression is important • To someone who would look straight in the eye • To firms or people whom I know from childhood	• I should get to know the person before I trust • I need time • I have to see the person in different situations before I trust • It depends on the subject • Only mother is trustworthy because mother loves you more than herself
Why is trust important?	• For sustainability • For permanence • For individual to be healthy (psychologically) • Because sometimes you have no other choice • Sometimes you believe in person' ability and sometimes you believe in person's benevolence • For reputation	• Relation is built on trust • To feel safe • To feel relax • For not being scared • For not being jealous • For not needing protection

Table.1. Results of the Focus Groups (cont.)

Why do you think trust is an important subject in management literature?	• Customer orientation • Permanence • Job satisfaction • Confidence (not to be fired) • Communication (manager-employee) • It is important for employee psychology • Performance • Economic crisis • To be happy • To be content • Flexibility • Motivation • The more they trust me the more stressed I get • Trust in me would make me lazy	• You can not work without trust • It is important because of communication and information sharing • Because it is related to risk taking • For long term you need trust (permanence)
Do you have a special preference related to nationalities while choosing your teammates?	• I would prefer to work with Turkish students because they would understand me better • I would prefer foreign people because it would provide different points of view • I would prefer foreign students because their English is better • I would prefer to work with Turkish students because they're very diligent	• With someone I've known before, so that I will not be taking risks • With a skilled person • With a responsible person • With someone who can take the initiative • With someone who is not lazy and will finish the work at promised time • With a serious person • With people that I have good communication • With a supportive person

VII.   RESULTS

VII.1. General Observations

Before interpreting the results of the focus groups, some observations are worth mentioning. In Group 1, it was interesting that they seemed very eager to express their opinions about trust and they had so much to say. They also seemed to be discovering themselves and their real emotions about the subject.

In Group 2, they seemed to be very certain about their opinions and expressed themselves in some sentences. At this point, it was language that seemed like a barrier but when this question (*is it language that prevents you from speaking much about subject?*) was directed, they stated that it is not the language and they are capable of expressing themselves. But it seemed that they had very certain feelings and opinions about the subject and they did not hesitate or need to rethink about it.

VII.2. Results for The First Question: *What is trust?*

According to the answers for the first question, the only common idea about "what trust is", is "*it is something that is learned over time and it is based on experience*". Group 1 described trust as a more relation based concept, like "*to depend on someone*" and

"*knowing that someone will catch you if you fall*" while Group 2 described it as a "feeling".

Group 1's statements like trust is "*to be sure that other party will not give harm*", "*to feel that someone is supportive*" and "*to know that someone will catch you if you fall*" reminds Rotter (1971)'s definition of trust that is "*trust is as a generalized expectancy to attribute benevolent intent to others...*" and Rousseau et al. (1998)'s definition that is "*…to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions of behavior of others.*" Here the keywords for students' definition of trust are: dependence, support, harmless and safety.

VII.3. Results for The Second Question: *Is trust related to personality or is it something that is learnt from experiences?*

For this question, Group 1 expressed that trust is experience based. An obvious sample expression is "*Trust is shaped by experience*". This finding is parallel to Hosmer (1995)'s and Bidault et al (2007)'s conclusions that trust has a strong connection with experience.

Group 2 also indicated that the role of experience is very crucial and trust is shaped by experience. But in this group the role of personality was stressed by some of the students. Statements like "*trust is shaped by*

experience and personality", "trust decision and the effects of knowledge on trust depends on personality" are similar to Rotter (1980) and Costa and McCrae (1992) that consider trust as a part of the individual character.

Both groups also stated that by time all people will become less trustful. Both groups agreed that trust is strongly affected by experience and even if a person has high levels of propensity to trust, it will decrease over time. This result shows that negative experiences will definitely decrease students' propensity to trust. Therefore, it is crucial that newly graduates should face favorable business environment in their early career.

VII.4. Results for The Third Question: *To whom would you trust?*

This question also has quite interesting implications. Group 2 strongly agreed on the notion that *"to trust someone, you should get to know that person and spend some time with him/her"*. For Group 1, it seemed that the trustee's personality and attitudes have a great impact on trust decision. This group searched for some particular characteristics such as being frank and honest. Yet among conditions of trust, only *"intention"* that is one of the Nooteboom (2007)'s conditions of trust was mentioned. It can be noted that more than specific personality characteristics, students appreciate good intentions and the time spend with trustee. Especially Group 2's statements like *"I need time", "I should get to know the person", "I have to see the person in different situations"* show that their trust is build over time. Students made comments about economic crisis that are worth mentioning.

VII.5. Results for The Fourth Question: *Why is trust important?*

Answers to this question revealed that Group 2 had a more individualistic point of view. They stated that trust is good for a person, for it makes a person feel safe and relax, etc. For Group 1, trust again evoked some ideas about business. An interesting idea was about trusting in someone in different dimensions, like trust in competence and trust in benevolence of someone. This is an important subject mentioned by Bigley and Pearce (1998) in trust literature.

VII.6. Results for The Fifth Question: *Why do you think trust is an important factor in management literature?*

While discussing this question, students agreed that trust is an important subject in management because it is important for communication and also for

Even though personality can have an effect on trust, it's mainly experience based.

permanence. While Group 1 focused on communication in terms of employee-employer, Group 2 focused on communication in terms of information sharing. For permanence, Group 1 focused on customers while Group 2 had a more relation based view.

Group 1 associated trust with economic crisis and fear of loosing jobs. This is due to high unemployment issue in Turkey and also economic concerns that all new graduates have in common. Answers like trust is important for job satisfaction is in accordance with Bijlsma and Van de Bunt (2003)'s suggestions.

Although students considered effects of trust on organizational outcomes such as permanence and performance, most of their expressions were related to employees' well being. Statement like *"trust is important for my confidence, happiness and psychology"* reveals that they think trust is primarily important for employees' welfare. This result indicates that trust is primarily important for employees' wellbeing. Therefore, may be it is more meaningful to examine the effects of trust on turnover, absenteeism, intention to leave and burn out.

VII.7. Results for The Sixth Question: *Do you have a special preference related to nationalities while choosing your teammates?*

This question was important because it could have some implications for cooperation in teams. In Group 1, students expressed their preference regarding nationality directly like *"Preferring to work with someone from my nationality"* while Group 2 mentioned characteristics such as responsibility and seriousness, etc.

VIII. DISCUSSION

Results of focus groups show that although these two groups have different backgrounds, their understanding about "trust" is very similar. For example, both groups agreed that trust is about feeling safe and knowing that other party will not give harm to you. This shows that even if there are cultural differences, people define trust in the same way. Also it was not hard for both groups to express their feelings about an intangible notion. So it can be asserted that;

Trust is not hard to define or understand, it is not that much subjective, either.

For the question about basis of trust (whether it is personality or experienced based), both groups agreed that it is built in time and shaped according to experience. Accordingly;

Third question revealed some differences between two groups. For Group 1, it was stated that to trust

someone, he/she ought to have some characteristics such as being honest. But for Group 2, the time spend with that particular person was important. As a result;

The definition of trustworthy person changes according to culture.

Fourth and fifth questions that aimed to reveal the importance of trust showed that both groups were aware of its importance both for daily and business life. Both groups agreed that to be able to have a healthy life, trust is crucial. Consequently;

The importance of and need for trust is undisputed.

Last question aimed to reveal students' preference regarding their team members' nationality. Some participants from Group 1 stated that they would like to work with someone from the same nationality and some stated the opposite without mentioning any particular choice but this choice was in respect of competency. For example, being diligent or speaking good English. But Group2 did not mention nationality and competency seemed to be important. Therefore;

While choosing teammates, competency is considered as an important criteria.

Even though students involved in the focus groups haven't got any courses related to trust, they found a strong link between trust and business environment. It was interesting that Group 1 associated trust with economic crisis and the firms' responses to crisis. They mentioned much about fear of loosing job and firms' permanency while no one from Group 2 mentioned anything about loosing job or trust in firm in crisis time. This result indicates the importance of cultural differences and economic conditions while thinking about the concept of trust.

In general, the results are impressively parallel to "trust" literature. Especially while expressing some ideas like "You trust in someone's benevolence and another one's competency" and "trust is important for information sharing", they sounded like real experts. Result of focus groups bring some insight such as, trust is not that much hard to examine and is directly affected by experience. Also the role of trustee and his /her competences' importance is revealed.

IX. CONCLUSION

In this study, it is indicated that trust is neither complicated nor hard to define. As a second finding, it is revealed that trust is not only crucial in business context but also in everyday life of students who are assumed as future's employees. Findings for the research carried out in this study could be summarized as follows; i) First it is shown that trust can have a common definition and; ii)Second the role of culture on definition and understanding of the concept is revealed.

This study serves as first steps toward understanding trust therefore many issues remain to be addressed. For example, in this study, the effects of cultural dimensions are not included and only perceptions' of students are considered. Future researches may focus on the effects of culture and explore the relationship between cultural dimensions and definitions of trust.

Fundamentally, business literature mostly focuses on effects of trust on desired outcomes. Although a question related to teamwork is included in this paper, the effects of trust on teamwork is not examined. Today "teamwork" is the key word for successful enterprise. Especially, the growing numbers of international enterprises, makes "understanding of culture" become more crucial. Hence, employees' propensity to trust toward people from different cultures and their preferences to work with a specific culture in regards to trust is also worth investigating.

Employees that define trust in the same way may work more comfortably together and this fact may improve productivity, increase motivation and help team work. Also these criteria may also be used in recruitment and placement and selection of expatriates. Future research may focus on addressed issues.

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