

# **Trust and distrust: Polar opposites, or independent but co-existing?**

*Mark N K Saunders, Graham Dietz and Adrian Thornhill*

## **Abstract**

This paper provides an empirical test of whether trust and distrust can co-exist in the mind of an employee. Two interrelated questions are considered: firstly, whether trust and distrust judgements are ‘symmetrical’ or whether they can occur ‘simultaneously’ as separate constructs; and, secondly, whether trust and distrust judgements entail the same or conceptually different expectations as revealed in their expressions and anticipated manifestations. Using a concurrent mixed-method design incorporating a structured card sort and in-depth interviews, data were collected from 56 participants in two organisations. The card sort findings offer little support for the co-existence of trust and distrust, but suggest they could be separate constructs. Interview data indicates that participants do perceive trust and distrust as entailing different sets of expectations and having different manifestations, providing some support for the ‘separate constructs’ thesis. We also find evidence of two new combinations of weak levels of trust and distrust not previously specified. The findings highlight how employees’ trust and distrust judgements are shaped, in part, by managerial actions and policies relating to quality of communication and job security. They also emphasise how, when employees are distrustful, differing practice interventions may be needed to reduce distrust than those used build trust.

## **Keywords**

trust , distrust , organizational change , mixed-method , card sort , organizational trust , mistrust , co-existence of trust and distrust , trust levels

## **Introduction**

In this paper we test empirically whether trust and distrust can co-exist. In one respect, this is a question with a long lineage. Game theory has looked at the contrasting effects and outcomes from Prisoners' Dilemma-style scenarios in which decisions to collaborate or defect equate to the decision of whether to trust or distrust another party – see Axelrod (1984) and, more recently, Gezelius (2007) and Chattoe-Brown (2011). Within sociology and particularly industrial relations, the dynamics of trust and distrust in the workplace have been theorised and studied, including Fox (1974), O'Neill (2002) and Edwards et al (2006). Fox, for example, argues that managerial decisions on the levels of discretion extended to employees shaped levels of trust, and the nature of social exchanges in the workplace; Roche (1991), however, contests Fox's analysis. Finally, the psychological contract literature has considered how employees react to events in their working lives in terms of whether they continue to trust or distrust their employer (e.g. Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Our focus in this study is narrower, however, and is located in the dedicated trust literature: it is to see whether in the mind of an individual trust and distrust are “polar opposites” – where the presence of one effectively precludes the occurrence of the other – or whether they can, and do, co-exist as simultaneous states with cognitive and affective dimensions. This conceptualisation is one that has not yet been tested empirically, despite a long-standing debate among trust scholars (e.g. Lewicki et al., 1998; Schoorman et al., 2007).

General agreement has now emerged regarding the definition of trust. Outlined in similar terms by scholars such as Lewicki et al. (1998), Mayer et al. (1995), and Rousseau et al. (1998), trust is depicted as occurring under conditions of risk which require the trusting party (the 'trustor') to develop favourable expectations of the intentions and behaviour of the other party ('trustee'), sufficient to prompt a willingness to become vulnerable to the trustee's future conduct. In Mayer et al.'s (1995) widely cited model, for example, the trustor's

assessment of the trustee covers the latter's ability (technical competence to carry out a given task), benevolence (their motives toward the trustor) and integrity (their adherence to commonly held principles, such as fairness and honesty). These beliefs inform a subsequent "willingness to render oneself vulnerable" (Rousseau et al., 1998: 395), and this 'trust' is demonstrated with a risk-taking act.

Far less agreement exists on how distrust, sometimes termed mistrust, should be conceptualised. Most researchers conceptualise trust and distrust as "antithetical" (Bigley and Pearce, 1998: 407), at mutually exclusive ends of a single continuous construct. 'Low trust' is seen as equivalent to 'high distrust' and vice versa (Bigley and Pearce, 1998), i.e. it is an 'either/or' relationship. Summarising this view, Schoorman et al. (2007: 350) declare, "We can find no credible evidence that a concept of distrust that is conceptually different from trust is theoretically or empirically viable."

Others disagree, notably Lewicki et al. (1998). They conceptualise trust and distrust as separate, "independent" constructs with their own distinct antecedents and consequences, but which are nevertheless linked, and can therefore "co-exist" in the same relationship. In their words: "just as it is possible... to like and dislike, and to love and hate, it may be possible to trust and distrust others" (1998: 449) – a 'both/and' relationship. McKnight and Chervany (2001: 29) argue that one might believe in another party (i.e. trust them), but still have a back-up in the form of distrust. Additionally, one may trust the other party on the basis of the presence of [distrusting?] controls (see Poppo and Zenger, 2002; Strätling et al., 2011). Thus, the split in the academic debate has centred upon two inter-related questions. First, are trust and distrust judgements symmetrical (Schoorman et al., 2007) or might they occur simultaneously (Lewicki et al., 1998)? Second, do trust and distrust judgements entail the same or conceptually different expectations, as revealed in expressions and anticipated manifestations (Lewicki et al., 1998)?

There are no empirical studies of which we are aware that have tried to settle this debate. In this research we offer an empirical test of Lewicki et al.'s framework, using data from two UK public sector organisations. Our contribution, therefore, is an empirical test of existing trust theory (cf. Edmondson & McManus, 2007); offering a number of extensions and inviting further research. We begin with a more expansive review of the trust-distrust debate, focusing upon the contrasting positions of Lewicki et al. (1998) and Schoorman et al. (2007) and the implications of this for theory and practice. We then outline our case study methodology, and present the findings, considering our two questions in sequence. In our discussion, we reflect upon the theoretical implications of these findings for current debates about the nature of distrust and its relationship to trust. We also consider the implications for organisations seeking to engender employee trust and mitigate against distrust. Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of this study and offer directions for future research.

### **Trust and distrust**

In the depiction of distrust as simply the opposite of trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Bigley and Pearce, 1998), the trustor either trusts or distrusts the trustee; the two conditions are “mutually exclusive” (Bigley and Pearce, 1998: 414). A state of mind consisting of one precludes the presence of its counter-position: “a complete lack of trust and distrust are the *same thing*” (Schoorman et al., 2007: 350 – emphasis added).

Lewicki et al. (1998) and McKnight and Chervany (2001) argue instead that this bipolar view does not reflect the reality of contemporary “multiplex” relationships. Invoking an analogy from physics, Lewicki et al. (1998: 444) depict modern working relationships as being in a state of “quasi-stationary equilibrium”, in which actors in their dealings with each other seek a balance and/or reconciliation between the two positions. They argue that trust and distrust are better approached as separate, independent but linked constructs, in which

“low distrust is *not the same thing* as high trust, and high distrust is not the same thing as low trust” (emphasis added). Moreover, both conditions can co-exist, each resting on their own combinations of expectations (beneficial or otherwise), and revealed in particular expressions and manifest actions. Consequently, it is possible for an individual within a given relationship to experience one of four prototypical relationship conditions (Lewicki et al., 1998):

1. *Low Trust/Low Distrust* is a position of arms-length, casual indifference regarding trust/distrust judgements (neither a willingness nor a reluctance about becoming vulnerable to the trustee). An individual’s perceptions of the other party provide no firm reasons to expect favourable or unfavourable treatment. This position is expected to shift into one of the other conditions as knowledge of the other party is accumulated;
2. *High Trust/Low Distrust* is a position of considerable trust, informed by perceptions of the trustee that provide compelling reasons to expect favourable treatment from them, and few reasons to suspect unfavourable treatment. These perceptions are likely to come from a series of productive encounters to date, prompting a confident willingness to be vulnerable again in the future;
3. *Low Trust/Low Distrust* is a position of ample scepticism and cynicism. The trustor’s perceptions provide several reasons to expect unfavourable treatment from the trustee, and little evidence suggestive of positive outcomes. This should result in a corresponding unwillingness to become vulnerable, such that “interdependence is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to manage” (Lewicki et al., 1998: 446);
4. *High Trust/Low Distrust* is a position of bounded trust and distrust, in which perceptions have been shaped by positive and negative experiences. In some facets of the relationship these prompt expectations of favourable treatment, leading to

willingness to trust; in other situations, expectations of unfavourable treatment lead to reluctance to trust.

The above presents a primarily cognitive depiction of trust. However, many argue that trust is also based on emotion, and that affective responses to the trustee's perceived motives and intentions do influence how the trustor evaluates her/his level of trust (Jones and George, 1998). We adopt this dual cognitive/affective conceptualisation in our method. Lewicki et al. (1998: 445) delineate a variety of feelings associated with each condition, that ought to be witnessed in an empirical investigation. Under conditions of Low Trust, the uncertainty as to whether outcomes will be favourable or unfavourable means that low trust is expressed as "no hope", "no faith" and "no confidence", and manifest in "passivity" and "hesitance". For conditions of High Trust, the strong expectations of favourable treatment and few reasons for doubt are expressed by "hope", "faith" and "confidence", and manifest in "assurance" and "taking the initiative". Under conditions of High Distrust, uncertainty is reduced, but the anticipation of unfavourable outcomes is expressed by "fear", "scepticism", "cynicism", and manifest in "wariness and watchfulness" and "vigilance". Finally, in conditions of Low Distrust, low expectations of unfavourable treatment are expressed by an "absence of scepticism", an "absence of cynicism", and "no fear", and are manifest by "low monitoring" (absence of "wariness and watchfulness") and "non-vigilance". It is important to note that Lewicki et al.'s 'Low' positions are equivalent to an *absence* of the feelings, rather than their presence in minimal amounts.

Lewicki et al. (1998: 447) argue that the experience of sustained ambivalence in working relationships (High Trust/High Distrust) is likely to have been under-stated, and that this condition may even be "the most prevalent" within "multiplex" working relationships. Such responses – neither consistently negative nor consistently positive – have also been theorised

to be potentially the most prevalent initial response to change (Piderit, 2000). Additionally, Lewicki et al. argue that the prevalence of High Trust/Low Distrust relationships is likely to have been *over*-stated. Yet empirical work lends only partial support to their theorising. For example, Saunders and Thornhill (2004) suggest that some employees view trust and distrust as a continuum, whilst others view them as separate constructs. They report limited evidence for the High Trust/High Distrust condition, perhaps because such a combination leads to a strong sense of internal contradiction which, contrary to Lewicki et al.'s theorising, *is* discomfoting.

In response, Schoorman et al. (2007) returned to their original model (Mayer et al., 1995) to retort that their conceptualisation was designed so that trust is domain-specific, and subject, in particular, to the assessment of the other's ability. This feature of trust, they argue, allows for multi-faceted and complex relationships, including simultaneous perceptions of trust and distrust. For example, one may trust a colleague to produce excellent research, but be reluctant to expose an audience of senior executives to her/his shambolic presentation skills. In other words, trust is likely to be contextual, task-based and pragmatic. Schoorman et al. (2007) argue that, although organisational relationships may allow for both trust and distrust to occur, this is only because of trust's domain-specificity. Feeling both trust and distrust toward someone *in general* is unlikely and unsustainable, however, and hence high distrust is unlikely to co-exist where there is high trust, and vice versa.

Schoorman et al. criticise McKnight and Chervany's (2001) review of the trust/distrust literature, from which the latter authors developed two separate conceptual models that are, other than the words 'trust' and 'distrust', identical. Indeed, the two concepts are portrayed puzzlingly as functional equivalents and opposites (McKnight and Chervany, 2001: 48): disposition to trust is depicted as having "faith in humanity", while disposition to distrust is "suspicion of humanity"; even the four trustworthiness beliefs are the same for both

constructs. This, Schoorman et al. suggest, points to the redundant irrelevance of the ‘separate-constructs’ thesis. In sum, they find “no credible evidence” for a conceptual distinction, adding that “if they are opposites of each other there is little added value in treating them as separate constructs” (2007: 350).

The resolution of this debate has considerable practical implications, particularly for intra-organisational scenarios. If trust and distrust are opposites and functional equivalents (Luhmann, 1979), it is improbable that they will co-exist in the same relationship (McKnight and Chervany, 2001), and are unlikely therefore to require different strategies for managing them. If, however, they are separate constructs, they may be experienced simultaneously, requiring differing and distinct coping strategies (McKnight and Chervany, 2001: 29). In practice, the management of work activities is likely to throw up a tension between the two (Fox, 1974; Luhmann, 1979). Yet, while several studies have found that trusting work relations can bring highly beneficial effects in terms of employee well-being, and performance (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001), suggesting that organisational leaders should foster greater trust in the workplace, it is often *distrust* that is institutionalised in managerial roles and organisational procedures, such as tight controls and monitoring regimes (Sitkin and Roth, 1993). Luhmann (1979) argues that the institutionalisation of distrust, and the ways in which managers follow de-personalised procedures, helps to foster managers’ perceptions of employees’ trustworthiness, and enhances levels of trust (see also Costa and Bijlsma-Frankema, 2007). Others argue instead that assumptions of distrust, and distrust-oriented policies and managerial practice, are likely to stifle and undermine stronger bonds of trust (Rousseau et al., 1998; Schoorman et al., 2007). Arguably, organisations need to be structured, and managed, to deal with both. This issue is especially apt in the current ‘crisis of trust’ not only in institutions (Edelman, 2013) but in employers (Hope-Hailey et al., 2012; Gillespie and Dietz, 2009), with many organisations and individual managers struggling to



manage positions of trust and distrust. Understanding the dynamic of this relationship is, therefore, likely to be of considerable benefit to managers, employees and employees' representatives. It is to our empirical testing of these two positions that we now turn.

### **Research settings**

Following Edmondson and McManus' typology of methodological 'fit', we view the theorising on this debate as *intermediate*, where there are clear "provisional explanations" offered for proposed relationships between constructs (2007: 1158). As such, the most appropriate method include "initial tests of hypotheses [or propositions] enabled by prior theory", such studies being "well served by a blend of both" qualitative and quantitative methods (2007: 1165). Thus, our study took the form of a concurrent mixed-method design.

The context of research is important. Change management situations are ideal settings for research into potentially contrasting cognitions and emotions (Piderit, 2000). In particular, they have been used to provide a clear context within which to study trust (Sorensen et al., 2011), but less frequently for trust and distrust (see Saunders and Thornhill, 2004). Within such situations, well-managed change has tended to be associated with employee trust, whereas badly managed change has tended to be associated with employee distrust (Sorensen et al., 2011). One such change situation, and the context for this research, is local authority restructuring. Within the UK this has been undertaken in response to successive governments' public sector modernisation agendas, seeking to inculcate continuous improvement expectations (Bach and Kessler, 2012). Performance has been assessed externally by the Audit Commission; improvement being measured and rated relative to other local authorities. Data were therefore collected within the context of employees' reactions to change from a purposive sample of two UK public sector organisations selected on the basis

of their relative performance and differing recent experience of change, in order to secure sufficient variance in trust/distrust perceptions among the research participants.

‘County’ employs around 4,400 employees (excluding school-based staff) whilst ‘District’ has around 600 employees. As a county council, County provides compulsory education, caring services, police, traffic, road building and maintenance, libraries and strategic planning in a largely rural county. As a district council in a different rural county, District provides services such as housing; development planning; leisure and museum services; refuse collection and street cleaning. County’s performance had been independently externally assessed as ‘excellent’ since 2005, the UK Government’s Audit Commission awarding its highest rating, ‘performing strongly’. Their 2008 Assessment Report<sup>1</sup> praised its management and their ‘outstanding cultural change’, achieved with no compulsory redundancies. Whilst the need for new organizational structures had created uncertainty, formal communication channels (including a weekly newsletter and regular team briefings) had been used to keep employees informed. In preparatory interviews, County’s Chief Officers’ Management Board perceived little employee resistance to the change (though their views may be somewhat biased). In contrast, District had experienced extensive restructuring and compulsory redundancies, its Directors’ and Heads of Services’ Group perceiving considerable employee resistance to the changes (these views may again be somewhat biased). Formal communication was acknowledged by these senior managers to have been limited and selective, prior to the appointment of a new Chief Executive in the year preceding this research. Although District had been externally assessed by the Audit Commission as ‘performing well’ since 2005, the associated Audit Report<sup>1</sup> highlighted that improvement was ‘below average’, and staff sickness levels were ‘high’. This contrast in management and performance in response to the same externally imposed change offered a context in which

employee *trust* was likely to be prevalent (County) and one in which employee *distrust* was likely to be prevalent (District).

### **Data collection**

Following a pilot test, two initial random samples were selected, stratified across each organization's directorates according to level within the hierarchy: 34 County employees and 30 District employees (Table 1). All employees selected agreed to take part and, although not used, counselling support was available in the event of the process causing employees stress.

### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Mixed-methods designs have been used within trust research to support understanding of the complexities of trust (e.g. Norman et al., 2010; Muethel, 2012), with qualitative data offering additional explanatory capability (Möllering, 2006; Saunders et al., 2010). In particular in-depth interviews have allowed clarification of meanings from quantitative data (Nooteboom, 2006), through “empirically mining for explanations” (Currall and Inkpen 2006: 244). We used a concurrent mixed-method data design, derived from Saunders and Thornhill (2004). This integrated two distinct data collection methods: a constrained card-sort (Rugg and McGeorge, 2005) of possible emotions in response to the organisational changes, and an associated in-depth interview to explore each participant's decisions in the sorting exercise. Such sorting techniques provide a method of eliciting categorisations (Whaley and Longoria, 2009) that is simple to administer and easy for the participant to understand (Fincher and Tenenberg, 2005). Originating from Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955) they are based on the belief that, although participants will categorise items differently, commonality will be sufficient to enable understandings (Butt, 2008). Using their own

criteria, each participant can therefore separately classify cards (items) such as ‘trusting’ and ‘distrustful’ to reflect the extent that they feel each.

The research was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles: held in private in a familiar neutral place in each employee’s workplace, with participation on a voluntary basis throughout and participant’s full anonymity being guaranteed. Audio recording was used with permission, interviews being subsequently transcribed. Where permission was not forthcoming detailed notes were taken throughout. Prior to commencing, only the overall purpose (“to establish and understand employees’ feelings about the managed change at County/ District”) was stated. There was no discussion of the organisation or its recent changes before the card-sort began. By not referring to trust, distrust or any emotions, participants were neither primed nor sensitised to these terms.

First, participants were asked to sort 49 cards (see Table 2), each card expressing a single ‘feeling’ in the active voice (e.g. ‘sceptical’ rather than ‘scepticism’). The cards included ‘trusting’ and ‘distrustful’, and six expressions and six manifestations identified by Lewicki et al. (1998) in relation to High or Low Trust and Distrust (the first four rows in Table 2). The pilot had revealed that participants misinterpreted one of Lewicki et al.’s manifestations of Low Distrust, ‘low monitoring’. This phrase was therefore removed, the manifestation being represented by absence of ‘wary and watchful’. To ensure the cards reflected a wide range of possible emotions, and to avoid participants being sensitised to Lewicki et al.’s trust expressions and manifestations, or to the significance of trust and distrust in the research, we added 35 more emotions derived from the literatures relating to the psychology of stress and emotion (Brockner et al., 1992; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), as identified and used by Saunders and Thornhill (2004).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Each participant was asked to categorise each card as either 'do not feel' or 'feel to some extent' in relation to the managed change at his or her organisation. This focus of the research, on the change programme, left the *referent* for the participants' trust/distrust unspecified and thus open for them to select. Those cards categorised as 'do not feel' were removed and recorded on a data sheet, following completion of this initial sort. Each participant then undertook two further sorts of the remaining cards, selecting those which (s)he felt 'strongly' and subsequently identifying the three about which (s)he felt 'most strongly', data being recorded on the same information sheet. Thus, the card-sort allowed data to be collected which recorded each employee's strength of feeling for each card using a four-category ordinal scale comprising 'do not feel' (coded 'low') to 'feel to some extent' (coded 'weak'), 'feel strongly' and 'feel most strongly' (both coded 'high').

The card sort was followed immediately by an interview of approximately one hour's duration structured around all four levels of the participant's categorisation, beginning with those that were felt most strongly. The selection and relative positions of each employee's feelings of 'trusting' and 'distrustful' were introduced and discussed, using the question, "I notice that you categorised [trusting/distrustful] as [perceived strength of feeling]... can we talk about this?" Care was taken to ensure that the expressions and manifestations derived from Lewicki et al. (1998) were discussed as part of this process. This allowed the structure for each interview to be grounded in each participant's categorisation of his or her feelings in relation to their specific change experience, involving a form of respondent validation during the interview (Pidgeon, 1996).

Our mixed methods design produced complimentary ordinal quantitative (card-sort) data and qualitative (interview) data for each participant, thereby increasing interpretive power (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Initially we utilised participants' categorisations of

‘trusting’ and ‘distrustful’ to locate them within Lewicki et al.’s (1998) framework, operationalising High Trust and High Distrust as ‘feel strongly’ or ‘feel most strongly’, and Low Trust and Low Distrust as ‘do not feel’. We then categorized independently the *foci* of trust and distrust for all participants who felt either or both of these sentiments at least to some extent. This was important in order to ensure that participants were reflecting on the *same* relationship in their reflections on both trust and distrust, since to discuss different relationships for each condition would not be a valid test of the theory. Foci were derived from their responses to questions about why they felt trusting and/or distrustful and comprised general foci (i.e. ‘colleagues’, ‘middle management’, ‘senior management’), specific foci (i.e. a named line manager, or senior manager, or chief executive) and ‘the organisation’ (Table 3). Where trust or distrust was not reported as felt, the foci were not categorised. Two of us categorized the participants’ foci independently. Our inter rater reliability ( $\kappa = 0.903$ ) was excellent (Von Eye and Mun, 2005), 92.5% of ratings being identical. For the four respondents where there was disagreement, we debated our understandings, and agreed final codes. Within this process we identified eight participants who discussed multiple trust foci (Table 3).<sup>2</sup> Such cases conflated focal parties, and hence could not be used as tests for simultaneous trust/distrust, and were also excluded from the analysis, our final sample comprising 56 participants (Table 1).

#### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Subsequently we used the interview data to explore trust and distrust judgements, considering the expressions and manifestations identified by Lewicki et al. Each paragraph relating to these expressions and manifestations of trust was categorised firstly according to the participant’s trust/distrust profile and secondly the focus of their trust/distrust. Categorised profiles were subsequently read and re-read to ensure full immersion in the data

(Silverman, 2011), justifications for selecting each card being considered within each organisation's context. Transcripts were compared and contrasted within and across the categories searching for patterns (Gall et al., 2006). Where potential patterns were identified these were tested subsequently against the remaining data. By doing this the interview data informed our understanding of the subject matter, allowing insights to be gained from "insiders' perspectives, their everyday theories of organizational life, and what they consider relevant in that particular setting" (Sackmann 1991: 305) and assertions to be made.

## **Findings**

Table 4 summarises the trust configurations reported by each participant, interpreted according to Lewicki et al.'s framework.

### TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

We categorised 10 participants as High Trust/Low Distrust overall (i.e. trusting "strongly" or "most strongly" with an absence of distrust). Seven participants were categorised as Low Trust/High Distrust (i.e. feeling no trust, and distrust at least "strongly"), five of whom came from the organisation audited as being less effective (District). Eleven participants were categorized as feeling Low Trust/Low Distrust. Finally, only one participant – a District employee – reported feeling both 'trusting' and 'distrustful'. This was the sole case of someone who might, arguably, fit the profile of a High Trust/High Distrust condition. However, for this case trust and distrust were felt only "to some extent" and so both were classified as Weak.

Additionally, 16 participants could be classified as Weak Trust/Low Distrust, in that they reported feeling 'trusting' "to some extent" whilst not feeling 'distrustful'. Eleven were

classified as Low Trust/Weak Distrust, feeling ‘distrustful’ ‘to some extent’, with an absence of feeling ‘trusting’. Given the weakness of these feelings it can be argued that neither category is represented in Lewicki et al.’s (1998) framework. Yet, these 27 cases constitute half the sample.

In sum, we found evidence from the card-sort for three of Lewicki et al.’s (1998) prototypical trust/distrust relationship conditions, but no real evidence for their most contentious position, that of High Trust/High Distrust. This latter finding challenges their assertion that this is a widespread experience in modern organisations, and supports Schoorman et al.’s (2007) scepticism regarding the likelihood of this internally contradictory condition. At the same time, the 11 participants reporting neither sentiment raises a question mark over Schoorman and colleagues’ assertion that trust and distrust are ‘either/or’ options. This was the first indicator that trust and distrust may entail different expectations and anticipate different outcomes. The card sort method also uncovered two conditions unanticipated in the current theorising that are nevertheless, we suggest, probably rather more common inside organisations, those of Weak Trust/Low Distrust and Low Trust/Weak Distrust – a position of no powerful sentiments on either dimension. It is noteworthy that Weak Trust was prevalent in the well-managed organisation (County), and Weak Distrust was reported only within the less effective organisation (District). Both are ‘either/or’ conditions.

To explore the nature of these trust/distrust profiles further, we considered the extent to which participants in each of Lewicki et al.’s four conditions and our two ‘Weak’ conditions selected the cards recording the expressions and manifestations identified by Lewicki et al. (1998) in relation to feelings of trust and distrust. We present the findings in four sections: the ‘trusting’, the ‘distrustful’, the ‘absence of both’ and the ‘ambivalent’.



*Trusting: High Trust/Low Distrust (n = 10) and Weak Trust/Low Distrust (n=16)*

Table 5 shows that the clear majority of participants categorised as High Trust/Low Distrust had selected each of the expressions and manifestations of trust identified by Lewicki et al. (1998) as felt, at least to some extent. Moreover, they rarely selected any of the feelings associated with distrust, other than – interestingly – ‘vigilant’. This pattern lends some support to Lewicki and colleagues’ framework.

#### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Such trusting employees felt ‘confident’, ‘assured’, and ‘faithful’, and were willing to ‘take the initiative’, with an absence of ‘fear’ and ‘cynicism’ and little ‘scepticism’ or ‘wariness and watchfulness’. All but one of the high trust participants interpreted the change as favourable, felt ‘assured’ by their treatment from their employer and hopeful for the future for themselves and the organisation. They were typified by a professional participant who commented:

“I’m *assured* in that the organisation allows people to develop. You’re allowed ownership of one’s area of work” (C09).

A recently appointed manager felt ‘hopeful’ because his organisation now had:

“...a process that is being properly managed and that delivers what is intended in the first place. The officer level has been *reassured* in the new management team.” [D08]

High Trust/Low Distrust participants did not feel ‘fearful’, few feeling ‘cynical’, recognising both the external pressures imposed on their employer by central government, as well as their freedom to ‘take the initiative’ within this context. In relation to this a manager commented:

“The organisation is constrained by a number of factors including the government, but within these constraints things can be achieved. I dislike *cynicism* and tell colleagues

to get out if they feel *cynical*... I can use *initiative* in a personal sense with my team but cannot do this in relation to budgets, which are given. In relation to the team there is a need to allow colleagues, who are specialists, to take their own initiative because of the highly specialised nature of their respective posts.” (C08)

Interestingly, all but one of these highly ‘trusting’ participants also reported feeling ‘vigilant’ – theoretically a manifestation of *distrust*. Their explanations indicated a positive attitude toward this concept, a professional commenting (in relation to trusting the organisation):

“I feel this strongly. Watching the organisation, seeing what opportunities are available for taking work forward. I see *vigilance* as positive; related to opportunity, not negative in terms of watching my own back” (C09).

and a technician commenting (in relation to trusting colleagues):

“I’m *vigilant* as I’m always aware of surroundings. It is to do with trust. Being aware of what is going on. I do trust, but I hold a little back just to make sure” (C05).

These ‘vigilant’ participants were not ‘fearful’ and did not expect any harmful actions from either their line managers or senior management, although there appeared to be some uncertainty regarding the official information emanating from their organisation. This intriguing mix of sentiments – trust and vigilance – recalls the Russian proverb, “trust but verify”, and suggests that vigilance may not always be a protective action against distrust but may in practice be a valuable attitude for *trust*-building.

A further 16 participants felt only Weak Trust/Low Distrust. Although only trusting “to some extent”, they nevertheless selected trust-related feelings, such as ‘confident’ and ‘hopeful’ in relation to the organisation and their job security, and their colleagues. The vast majority of these employees highlighted similar issues, emphasising that they felt willing to ‘take the initiative’, ‘confident’ and ‘assured’. However, nearly half of these Weak Trust/Low Distrust employees did not feel ‘faithful’. Those in more junior positions tended to be more ‘sceptical’ about whether their organisation’s proposed changes would “live up to

expectations” [C29]. A manager commented that whilst he felt ‘trusting’ to some extent of his immediate manager, this was not the case for more senior managers, although he did not distrust them. This manager felt both ‘sceptical’ and ‘cynical’, commenting how “suggestions are made, but I feel *cynical* whether anything will happen” [C22]. His expectation of being treated favourably by his own manager was tempered by his view of senior management:

“Managers may not be able to do anything about the situation because we are in a less valued area (job role), compared to another.... At a higher organisational level, I cannot relate to trusting.” [C22]

In summary, the majority of High Trust/Low Distrust participants explained their trust in terms of favourable expectations for both themselves and, for more senior employees, the organisation. For many, trust was developed and maintained through personalised interactions in particular, and through identification with line managers, colleagues or the organisation in general. Belief that neither their line manager nor more senior management would cause them harm was characterised by an absence of fear and cynicism, employees being ‘confident’ and identifying strongly with the changes for their organisation. Where participants felt Weak Trust/Low Distrust, the absence of fear was offset by their being more likely to feel ‘sceptical’ and ‘cynical’. Consequently, rather than employees reasoning that there was no need to be watchful and wary, there was an absence of reasoned fear, since harmful action had not occurred and was not considered likely. This was manifest in their feeling assured and anticipating they would take the initiative at work.

*Distrustful: Low Trust/Low Distrust (n = 7) and Low Trust/Weak Distrust (n=11)*

Table 6 reports the results for this group. Taking each sub-group in turn, a majority of the seven Low Trust/High Distrust participants (predominantly from the less effective organisation) felt ‘sceptical’ and ‘cynical’, and all were ‘wary and watchful’. Four reported

feeling ‘vigilant’ and ‘hesitant’, with three feeling ‘fearful’, particularly regarding their future roles. All these manifestations and expressions are associated with low trust.

#### TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

In interview, many participants attributed their feeling ‘distrustful’ to a lack of open and honest communication and their lack of influence on senior management’s actions. A ‘cynical’ manager set out his reasons:

“I appreciate there are valid reasons for the process because the Council has to make £3million savings... I’m always slightly *cynical* about staff consultation processes – seeking staff ideas. Managers know what they want to do and there is nothing you can do about it...” [D16]

Like others, he felt ‘distrustful’ because he expected to lose his job (intended harm), and did not feel ‘trusting’ as he had little or no ‘confidence’ in beneficial actions occurring. Another male professional summarised his own reasons for feeling strongly ‘distrustful’, echoing the feelings of many within that organisation:

“[Senior] Management have an idea of what they want and who they want and will stop at nothing to achieve targets. I am resigned to the fact there is nothing you can do, you are just a number in a hat and you will be drawn if you are lucky. I feel that [senior] management’s minds have been made up before the process started, I don’t think consultation information has been taken on board. They do what they want” [D03]

This response hints at the attribution of possible premeditated intentions to senior management (to disregard the consultation’s findings) – a clear manifestation of High Distrust. Yet other sentiments identified by Lewicki et al as associated with distrust, notably feeling ‘passive’, were rarely selected. Selection of ‘passive’ relates to an acceptance of what has happened, alongside an absence of expectation of beneficial actions and not feeling ‘hopeful’ (Low Trust). Just one strongly ‘distrustful’ participant felt ‘passive’ “about the

whole process” (D16). The rarity of this feeling being chosen may be because other participants were either resigned to, or frustrated by, the way the change was being managed and their lack of voice, or were actively searching for alternative employment. Distrustful employees who did not feel ‘fearful’ justified this principally in terms of their perceived employability or their likely redundancy package. The same respondent commented:

They can’t get rid of me without paying redundancy, which will be enough to cover me until I get another job.” (D16).

Turning to the 11 Low Trust/Weak Distrust participants, eight felt ‘wary and watchful’. The majority of these felt ‘sceptical’ and ‘cynical’ regarding whether or not the change being implemented would improve the services offered for their organisation’s customers, and hence, as with other ‘distrustful’ participants, felt ‘concerned’ about future unfavourable treatment of themselves. Some who felt weak distrust sensed a “hidden agenda to reduce staff” [D23]; one even referred to recently appointed middle managers as “hatchet men” [D27]. Whilst these participants recognised the need for change in response to government agendas, they did not expect this would be beneficial. This was highlighted by a middle manager who commented, in relation to feeling ‘sceptical’:

“The Government or Council seem to have lots of initiatives; it costs a fortune, they sack people [and then] a couple of years later they go down a different route or tack... I’m *sceptical* it will last, there will be more changes... The new government could have completely different ideas” [D27].

Like others he commented that poor communication and a partial withholding of information by senior management had resulted in the distrust, and a “them and us” attitude. However, somewhat surprisingly, nearly half (five) of Low Trust/Weak Distrust participants still felt ‘hopeful’ – a sentiment categorised as having trust associations. An administrative manager, who was ‘distrustful’ yet also felt ‘hopeful’, commented:

“Do I want the challenge? I said I did. I knew it would be stormy to begin with and I haven’t been proved wrong. I went in with my eyes open.” [D19]

At the same time, she also highlighted that she felt ‘sceptical’ and ‘hesitant’ regarding the immediate benefits for her organisation (a Low Trust sentiment):

“I don’t think with the managing change process people were aware of the impact. A lot of people were quite *sceptical* that it will work. The whole change process will not settle down in the timescale. We’ve got to expect other changes, team structures will change. I know what I have got now will change by the end of the year.” [D19]

In summary, Low Trust/ High Distrust and Low Trust/Weak Distrust participants held different expectations, and anticipated different relationship outcomes, to those who were more trusting. These findings lend support to Lewicki et al.’s (1998) broad proposition of trust and distrust as independent with their own distinct antecedents and consequences. Feelings of distrust were explained in relation to fear of harm to themselves, other employees and the organisations’ customers. Their low trust was expressed through limited or no ‘confidence’ in the organisation (and its future). They distrusted senior management, expecting they did not have their best interests at heart, this being manifest in their being ‘wary and watchful’, and likely to be ‘hesitant’. Despite only one participant selecting ‘passive’, an absence of trust still appeared to engender a resigned acceptance of the changes for the majority of participants in this category, often due to a perceived lack of voice and with future benefits seen as unlikely.

#### *Absence of both: Low Trust/Low Distrust (n = 11)*

The absence of both trust and distrust was reported by 11 participants (Table 7). As theorised by Lewicki et al. (1998), the majority did not report feeling the expected distrust sentiments (i.e. ‘fearful’, ‘sceptical’ or ‘cynical’). However, several did select expressions and manifestations associated with trust, despite not feeling ‘trusting’ to any significant

degree. Nearly two thirds, for example, still felt ‘hopeful’ and ‘confident’, whilst few felt ‘hesitant’ and only one ‘passive’ and one ‘fearful’. Those who felt ‘hopeful’ considered that the changes would enable them to “achieve in the role” [professional employee C31] and were “excited and hopeful for the future” [junior administrator C34] for their organisation’s customers.

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

Where participants felt ‘confident’ and ‘hopeful’ about their future, there was recognition that they might not remain with the organisation, a sentiment typified by this middle manager:

“We have currently been assimilated into our existing roles and changes will occur at the end of a three year period. I have a positive outlook. I feel I am in a win-win situation. Either I will end up with a better job, or I will be made redundant and pensioned off; either option is perfectly acceptable to me.” [D12]

Like many Low Trust/Low Distrust participants, who selected feelings associated with trust despite not reporting high levels of ‘trust’, one middle manager felt neither ‘passive’ nor ‘hesitant’, but chose ‘take initiative’ as one of her three most strongly felt feelings. She was determined to succeed both for herself and for the organisation, and justified this in relation to her specific work and support from senior managers:

“The work I do is not a statutory requirement so there is a need to *take the initiative* to keep it going. Some Councils do not encourage the work I do. I and my team are known in the Council, including at Chief Executive level. I do get support from the Council but it can also be a struggle because it is not popular (outwardly) and is not a vote-catcher. Support is throughout the Council and the Chief Executive offers support, even though the area of work has brought grief.” [C14]

Despite not feeling ‘fearful’, some participants were nevertheless ‘wary and watchful’ and ‘vigilant’. One professional’s comments emphasised a felt need for remaining alert, especially regarding the way in which the organisation had treated some employees:

“You have got to be ‘wary and watchful’ about things that affect your department and day-to-day issues”. [C02]

Participants selecting expressions and manifestations associated with distrust such as ‘cynical’, ‘sceptical’ and ‘wary and watchful’ appeared less certain regarding their relationships with immediate line managers, or with the organisation. One administrator reflected on her own ‘cynicism’:

“‘Cynical’ concerns all those supposed savings. How much has been spent on so called improvements to buildings, air con, heating? How much has changed? How much has been spent on paying redundancies?” [D13]

Another commented:

“I’m *cynical* – it’s ‘here we go again’. This is why I distance myself from the Council. In a humorous way it doesn’t get me down. But then I’m not important, I’m not going to affect anything as I’m not ‘management’” (C11).

These employees had neither an expectation of beneficial actions nor were fearful of intended harm. Such feelings were again most apparent in more junior and middle managers, who appeared to be expecting the future to benefit neither them nor their service. One senior manager articulated this ‘wary and watchful’ state:

“I don’t know what is coming. I’ve started applying for other jobs, yet I like [County] and want to work here. I don’t think [senior management] will take action” [C19].

Whilst a professional employee commented:

“You have got to be wary and watchful about things that affect your department and day-to-day issues” [C2].

In summary, Low Trust/Low Distrust participants tended to feel unfavourable towards or neutral about their organisation, and were likely to be cynical and sceptical about the anticipated outcomes espoused by their line and senior managers. Although some were still hopeful regarding the organisation and their future within it, their reported feelings of



wariness and vigilance suggested managerial actions designed to engender trust were less likely to succeed. This was particularly so where participants interpreted both the external driver for change and their organisation's resulting actions negatively. Where participants interpreted externally-imposed change more favourably, they were determined to succeed for themselves and for the organisation, suggesting that it would be possible in the future for them to trust. Those who interpreted the change unfavourably based this on feelings of uncertainty. This suggests that, dependent upon their organisation's actions to address these doubts and concerns, it might be possible for them to make the leap into more confident support for the change.

*Ambivalent: High Trust/High Distrust (n=0) and Weak Trust/Weak Distrust (n = 1)*

Despite Lewicki et al.'s (1998) theorising that High Trust/High Distrust – a condition of sustained ambivalence – is likely to have been under-stated, we found only one participant who reported feeling both 'trusting' and 'distrustful'. Even then, these sentiments were felt only "to some extent". This manager felt 'hopeful' and 'assured' (synonymous with high trust) – yet at the same time 'hesitant', and neither 'faithful' nor 'confident' (indicating low trust). Moreover, her expression of scepticism – manifest in her being both 'wary and watchful' and 'vigilant' – is synonymous with high distrust, whilst her not expressing 'fear' or 'cynicism' is suggestive of low distrust. She indicated that her trust was based on feeling 'assured' by her evaluation of the changes to date:

"I feel we have dealt with people fairly. Redundancies have been kept to a minimum. They are a necessary evil... but it is something we have had to go through. I hope it will be alright in the end result." [D15]

This statement reflects an appreciation of the benevolence and integrity evident in the organisation's change effort, notably the justice apparent in the handling of the job losses

(even if, set against the rest of the District sub-sample, hers is a minority viewpoint). But other aspects, particularly communication, had generated scepticism and uncertainty for her:

“Comms’ have improved... I don’t think it is everything it should have been – now we are having all these staff sessions and they don’t always say much, although it is important to have them. Sometimes things happen and they are sat on. I feel anxious as things are working differently and I’m not quite sure how to go about things”  
[D15]

We suggest, therefore, that her feelings of trust and distrust seem to have different antecedents: efforts to minimise the number and impact of redundancies had engendered trust, but the perceived withholding of information in communications had led to feelings of distrust. This is a particularly interesting case for the theoretical argument, from Schoorman et al. (2007), that simultaneous trust/distrust in the same party can only occur in relation to different domains, but not within the *same* domain. If the domain within which trust judgements are being made is change management *overall*, trust and distrust are indeed being felt simultaneously, as Lewicki et al. (1998) would expect. However, if the two different elements of the change are seen as *distinct* domains, trust and distrust are being linked to separate domains, as per Schoorman et al. With only one example, we cannot rule in either favour.

## **Discussion**

This paper has examined two key conceptual questions regarding the nature and prevalence of trust and distrust in organisational relationships: whether trust and distrust judgements are symmetrical or might they occur simultaneously and, secondly, whether trust and distrust judgements entail the same or conceptually different expectations revealed in expressions and anticipated manifestations. Our two questions were explored within two contrasting organisational contexts characterised by uncertainty and change and offer the first study to examine experiences of both constructs, simultaneously.

Our first contribution to theory from the study suggests that within organisational relationships trust and distrust judgements rarely occur simultaneously with regard to a single 'trustee' subject. However this encompasses a somewhat more complex relationship than that suggested by either Lewicki et al. (1998) or Schoorman et al. (2007). In total, 17 participants reported occupying a 'strong' position at one end of what Schoorman et al depict as an 'either/or' trust/distrust continuum, with no feelings to the contrary. A further 27 participants felt one or other of the sentiments 'weakly', without feeling its opposite. Together, these 44 'either/or' subjects imply that trust usually precludes the occurrence of distrust, whilst distrust precludes the occurrence of trust. This result lends considerable support to Schoorman et al.'s argument that trust and distrust are unlikely to occur simultaneously. However, our findings also provide qualified support for Lewicki et al.'s theorising that trust and distrust *are* separate rather than symmetrical constructs, and for their framework of prototypical relationships, with trust and distrust present or absent to different degrees.

Participants' self-categorizations of feelings of trust and distrust vindicate Lewicki et al.'s (1998) proposition that an absence of trust is not the same as distrust and vice versa. Whilst 44 participants felt either trusting or distrustful, 11, felt neither trusting nor distrustful (Table 4). Moreover, of these 11 'Low Trust/ Low Distrust' participants (i.e. those reporting neither sentiment), the absence of 'trusting' did *not* result in their reporting feelings of 'distrust'; nor had an absence of 'distrustful' sentiments resulted in those participants feeling trusting. At approximately a fifth of the final sample, the possibility of people holding this indifferent position suggests that Schoorman et al.'s (2007) contention that there is little value in treating them as separate constructs is not borne out entirely by our empirical observations.

However, we did find a number of deviations from Lewicki et al.'s (1998) categories. Their most contentious combination, High Trust/ High Distrust – the one most criticised by

Schoorman et al. (2007) – was not, as they theorised, “the most prevalent” (Lewicki et al., 1998: 447). Trust and distrust were observed simultaneously only once in our sample of 56 participants, and even then, both states were bounded, felt only to some extent (i.e. weakly) and, in interviews, appeared to have distinct contextual stimuli. On its own, the rarity of this combination might be considered as lending support to Schoorman et al.’s argument: that, contrary to Lewicki and colleagues’ anticipations, the internal contradiction involved in both trusting and being distrustful *is* unsustainable. Alternatively, the fact that one person did articulate a weak position of ‘ambivalence’ may be seen as evidence that it *is* a viable position, at least for some (see Piderit, 2000). Future research could look to explore this further.

Together, these findings emphasise the need to explore the reasons behind employees feeling trusting and distrustful. Invariably this will be influenced by both the wider environmental and organisational contexts, such as the cultural and institutional frameworks within which trust (and distrust) operate (Saunders et al., 2010). Our research was undertaken within the context of an externally imposed public sector modernisation agenda, the associated change creating uncertainty in both organisations. As suggested by Sorensen et al. (2010) we found trusting sentiments and selected expressions and manifestations in the well-managed organisation (County), and distrust articulated and experienced in the less effective organisation (District). Both were operating at the same time in the same environmental context, suggesting that the ways in which employees process and experience trust and distrust judgements can be shaped, to a significant degree, by managerial action. Further research into the precise antecedents of each should prove a valuable line of enquiry. The level of discretion designed into jobs (i.e. ‘empowerment’) is one long-standing variable worthy of investigation (Fox, 1974; Roche, 1991; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). Our interview testimonies point also to the quality of communications and to the treatment of colleagues

during change. Distrust seemed in many cases to be prompted by incidents of injustice or harm (i.e. malevolence and dishonesty), whereas a lack of trust seemed to be linked to the calibre of leadership (i.e. incompetence). However, there were exceptions and so this could be explored in future research.

On this point, the interview data point to the salience of trust in different *foci* (Redman et al., 2011). We found in participants' responses that some trust relationships at work can endure, despite a climate of distrust, or despite distrust of other parties. This trust tended to be localised, in immediate line managers and colleagues, and could be attributed to the conduct and character of the people involved, although senior managers' decisions could undermine such positive local relations.

Our findings suggest that for a particular contextual focus the vast majority of individuals either actively trust, actively distrust – or feel neither. The prevalence of an absence of both trust and distrust is, given the extant theory, is a surprising condition and our second contribution to theory. The absence of both appears to equate to individuals distancing themselves from their work: 'disengagement' in contemporary parlance. Efforts to instil engagement may be successful for people in this category (over half felt 'hopeful' and 'confident', for example), but may fail to elicit movement in either direction as regards trust.

The discovery of two 'weak' conditions, highlighting no strong sentiments of trust or of distrust and no feelings for the other condition, is our third extension of theory. These conditions are clearly distinct from the stronger feelings of 'high' trust or of 'high' distrust, as identified in Lewicki et al.'s (1998) framework, and suggest that their 2×2 typology needs to be 3×3. The 'weak' conditions do not correspond with Barney and Hansen's (1994) 'weak form trust', which pertains only when the scope for opportunistic betrayal is negligible. Our 'weak' trust resembles, to a degree, Barney and Hansen's (1994: 177) 'semi-strong' form of trust, which they depict as based on "appropriate governance devices [being] in place", such

as, in our setting, established HR procedures and codes of conduct. It is instructive that many of our 16 'weak trust' participants cited job security policies as a source of their modest but not compelling trust in their employer. Both our 'weak' conditions imply that some nuance needs to be added to Lewicki et al's notion of ambivalence. Weak Trust/Low Distrust participants still reported vestiges of distrust, in particular feeling 'sceptical'. In contrast, the 11 participants categorised as Low Trust/Weak Distrust retained some feelings associated with trust, in particular feeling 'hopeful'. We would suggest that both are likely to be prevalent in modern organisations, as they were in our sample (half the participants), particularly so for employees who are disengaged from their work and their employer's purpose. Research into the antecedents of 'weak' trust and 'weak' distrust may prove fruitful.

Our final contribution relates to our second question, whether trust and distrust judgements entail the same or conceptually different expectations. Participants' expressions and manifestations of trust and distrust were in general supportive of Lewicki et al.'s (1998) framework indicating that trust and distrust do entail conceptually different expectations. Virtually all trusting participants who did not feel distrustful felt the expressions and manifestations of trust (other than faithful) identified by Lewicki et al. (Table 5). For the majority of these participants feelings and manifestations of distrust were, as theorised by Lewicki et al., absent. This was particularly the case for High Trust participants. Some of the reported manifestations were contrary to Lewicki et al.'s framework. Most curious was the manifestation of 'vigilance' as a positive state for trust. Whilst associated checking up is generally presumed to be distrustful (Schoorman et al., 2007), in the interviews, 'vigilance' appeared to be linked to participants' desire to be competent and dutiful in their work, or to avoid being naïve. Vigilance seems to foster the trustors' sense of their own trustworthiness, and contributes to their assessment of the trustee. The majority of distrustful participants who did not feel trusting, felt the expressions and manifestations of distrust identified by

Lewicki et al., although feelings of fear were less prevalent (Table 6). Feelings and manifestations of trust were, as theorised, absent for the majority. Yet, despite feelings of distrust, we found half the participants expressing hope. These findings indicate that, as theorised by Lewicki et al., trust and distrust entail conceptually different expectations. They also suggest that there are intriguing disconnects between the cognitive evaluation of trust and distrust, and their affective manifestations particularly with regard to vigilance. Research could explore this, including the cognitive dissonance involved.

### **Implications and conclusions**

Our findings have three implications for employers seeking to engender trust from their staff. Reviewing the antecedents of the High Trust/Low Distrust condition, managerial competence and benevolence emerge as common themes, as well as the merits of fairness, regular communications in which candour and integrity are vital characteristics, and Whitener et al.'s (1998) 'delegation of control' (i.e. empowerment). These implications endorse long-standing recommendations in the trust and change management literatures (e.g. Kramer, 2006; Searle and Skinner, 2011). The findings also emphasise how, when employees are distrustful, different interventions to those used to build trust may be required to reduce distrust. These indicate a need to focus upon the consistency of line and senior managers' actions, ensuring promises are kept and actions are communicated and explained clearly (i.e. 'integrity'; 'behavioural consistency'). Yet, for the ambivalent, interventions associated with developing trust, and based around demonstrations of ability, are more likely to be successful than those related to dissolving distrust. The trust repair literature is clear in its prescription to match the response to the nature of the violation (see Dirks, Lewicki and Zaheer, 2009). The challenge for employers is to endeavour to offset the impact of the factors identified that create distrust, whilst at the same time supporting and enabling those that create and maintain

trust (see also Piderit on managing ambivalence, 2000). Of course, in most models of trust, all three attributes of trustworthiness (cf. Mayer et al, 1995) need to reach a threshold of credibility for trust to be initiated.

Whilst having two organisations with contrasting reactions to change increases the generalizability of the findings, the specific context, relatively small sample size and narrow participant profile (non-manual employees' experiences of change) can be considered limitations. Consequently, although the scale and regularity of change is widely perceived to be increasing (IBM, 2008), we see a need for further research to establish whether such trust/distrust responses are prevalent in other national and sectoral contexts, as well as in organisational conditions of relative stability. We might hypothesise that a more predictable organisational context would see a clearer split in experiences, along the lines of Schoorman et al.'s argument. Additionally, our sample came predominantly from middle management and junior roles. Adopting the same method, future research could give attention to senior employees' experiences of trust, as this sub-group are most likely, according to Lewicki et al. (1998), to be both trusting and distrustful. Although we left the referent for the participants' trust open for them to select, future research could restrict the referent to a single pertinent relationship (e.g. immediate line manager), to delineate more precisely trust/distrust dynamics within certain working relationships. Finally, there is also scope for further empirical work to explore and test statistically the distinctiveness of trust and distrust conceptions in different organisational contexts and situations, and with different methods. For example, providing that well documented concerns regarding construct validity and the precise conceptualisation of trust (Gillespie, 2012) can be addressed, a large-scale survey – with separate trust and distrust items – could allow statistical testing of the relationships between constructs, expressions and manifestations, and strength of feelings.



To conclude, our findings suggest that the experience of trust and distrust are distinctive independent constructs and experiences, either or neither of which may be present, but rarely co-existing. Within these experiences the strength of feeling differs markedly. In addition to both ‘low’ and ‘high’ strength feelings, we found clear evidence of ‘weak’ feelings of trust or of distrust. These were associated with differing expectations and anticipated relationship outcomes than where ‘low’ and ‘high’ strength feelings were held. To improve our understanding, these differences in trust and distrust constructs, and the associated experiences, need to be explored across a broad range of organisational contexts and levels.

### **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank the Editor Paul Edwards and anonymous reviewers for their very helpful suggestions.

### **Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Full references to County’s Corporate Assessment Report and District’s Annual Audit Report are not included to preserve anonymity. Reports for all English Local Authorities are available at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/audit/Pages/Default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> An example is C16, a County respondent, who said, “I don’t feel my *immediate manager* is honest with me” when discussing his lack of trust, but said “I don’t feel *the organisation* cares or is supporting me” (emphases added) when discussing his distrust. Similarly D14, a District respondent, talked about feeling “very wary about who you can trust, and watchful of what is going on in *other departments*”, and “a lot of ‘backstabbing’... *from top to bottom*. A comment I made to *a member of staff* came back to me from *a management source*” (emphases added).

## References

- Axelrod, R. (1984). *The Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bach, S. and Kessler, I. (2012). *The Modernisation of the Public Services and Employee Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barney, J.B. and Hansen, M.H. (1994). Trustworthiness as a source of competitive advantage. *Strategic Management Journal*, 15(S1), 175-190.
- Bigley, G.A. and Pearce, J.L. (1998). Straining for Shared Meaning in Organisational Science: Problems of Trust and Distrust'. *Academy of Management Review* 23(3), 405-21.
- Brockner, J., Tyler, T.R. and Cooper-Schneider, R. (1992). The Influence of Prior Commitment to an Institution on Reactions to Perceived Unfairness: The Higher They Are, the Harder They Fall. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37 (2), 241-61.
- Butt, T. (2008) *George Kelly: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Chattoe-Brown, E (2011). Combining ethnography and game theory using simulation: A critique and development of 'Can norms account for strategic action?' by S. Gezelius. *Sociology*, 46 (2), 339-53.
- Costa, A.C. and Bijlsma-Frankema, K. (2007). Trust and control inter-relations: new perspectives on the trust-control nexus: towards integrated perspectives. *Group and Organization Management*. 32, 392-406.
- Currall, S.C. and Inkpen, A.C. (2006). On the complexity of organizational trust: a multi-level co-evolutionary perspective and guidelines for future research. In R. Bachmann and A. Zaheer (eds) *Handbook of trust research*, 235-46. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Dirks, K.T. and Ferrin, D.L. (2001). The role of trust in organizational settings. *Organizational Science*. 12(4), 450-67.
- Dirks, K.T., Lewicki, R.J. and Zaheer, A. (2009). Repairing relationships within and between organizations: Building a conceptual foundation. *Academy of Management Review*. 34(1), 68-84.
- Edelman (2013). *Edelman Trust Barometer*. New York: Edelman Associates.
- Edmondson, A.C. and McManus, S.E. (2007). Methodological Fit in Management Field Research. *Academy of Management Review*. 32(4), 1155-79.
- Edwards, P., Bélanger, J. and Wright, M. (2006). The bases of compromise in the workplace: A theoretical framework. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44(1), 125-45.
- Fincher, S. & Tenenberg J. (2005). Guest editorial: Making sense of card sorting data. *Expert Systems* 22(3): 89-93.
- Fox, A. (1974). *Beyond contract: Work, power and trust relations*. London: Faber & Faber
- Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., and Gall, J. P. (2006). *Educational research: An introduction*. (8<sup>th</sup> edn) Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Gezelius, S (2007). Can norms account for strategic action? Information management in fishing as a game of legitimate strategy. *Sociology*, 41 (2), 201-18.
- Gillespie, N. (2012). Measuring trust in organizational contexts: an overview of survey-based measures in F. Lyon, G. Möllering and M.N.K. Saunders (eds) *Handbook of Research Methods on Trust*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 175-188.

- Gillespie, N. and Dietz, G. (2009). Trust repair after an organization-level failure. *Academy of Management Review*, 34(1), 127-45.
- Hope-Hailey, V., Searle, R. and Dietz, G. (2012). *Where has all the trust gone?* London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development research report. March.
- IBM. (2008). *The enterprise of the future: Global CEO study*. Portsmouth: IBM Institute for Business Value.
- Jones, G.R. and George, J.M. (1998). 'The experience and evolution of trust: Implications for cooperation and teamwork', *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 531-46.
- Kelly, G.A. (1955). *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Kramer, R.M. (ed) (2006). *Organizational Trust: A reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lazarus, R.S. and Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Lewicki, R.J., McAllister, D.J. and Bies, R.J. (1998). 'Trust and distrust: New relationships and realities', *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 438-58.
- Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and Power*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Mayer, R.C., Davis, J.H. and Schoorman, F.D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709-34.
- McKnight, D.H. and Chervany N.L. (2001). Trust and distrust definitions: One bite at a time. In R Falcone, M Singh and Y.H. Tan (eds) *Trust in cyber-societies*, 27-54. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Mishra, A.K. and Spreitzer, G.M. (1998). 'Explaining how survivors respond to downsizing: The roles of trust, empowerment, justice and work redesign', *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 567-88.
- Möllering, G. (2006). *Trust: Reason, Routine, Reflexivity*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Muethel, M. (2012). Mixed method applications in trust research: simultaneous hybrid data collection in cross-cultural settings using the board game method. In F. Lyon, G. Möllering and M.N.K. Saunders (eds) *Handbook of Research Methods on Trust*, 121-9. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Norman, S.M., Avolio, B.J. and Luthans, F. (2010). 'The impact of positivity and transparency on trust in leaders and their perceived effectiveness', *Leadership Quarterly*, 21(3), 350-64.
- Nooteboom, B. (2006). Forms, sources and processes of trust. In R. Bachmann and A. Zaheer (eds) *Handbook of trust research*, 247-63. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- O'Neill, O. (2002). A question of trust. *The Reith Lectures*. British Broadcasting Corporation Radio Broadcast, 1 May. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/the-reith-lectures/transcripts/2000/> [Accessed 8 February 2013].
- Piderit, S.K. (2000). 'Rethinking resistance and recognizing ambivalence: A multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organizational change', *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 783-94.
- Pidgeon, N. (1996). Grounded theory: theoretical background, in J.T.E. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*, 75-85. Leicester: BPS Books.

- Poppo, L and Zenger, T. 2002. Do formal contracts and relational governance function as substitutes or complements? *Strategic Management Journal*, 23(8), 707-25.
- Redman, T., Dietz, G., Snape, E and van der Borg, W (2011). Trust in the workplace: A multiple constituencies approach. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22(11), 2384-402.
- Robinson, S.L. and Rousseau, D.M. (1994). Breaching the psychological contract: Not the exception but the norm. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. 15(3), 245-59.
- Roche, W.K (1991). 'Trust dynamics and organisational integration: the micro-sociology of Alan Fox'. *British Journal of Sociology*, 41 (1), 95-113.
- Rousseau, D.M., Sitkin, S.B. Burt, R.S. and Carmerer, C. (1998). Not so Different After All: a Cross-Discipline View of Trust. *Academy of Management Review* 23(3), 393-404.
- Rugg, G. and McGeorge, P. (2005). The sorting techniques: a tutorial paper on card sorts: picture sorts and item sorts. *Expert Systems* 22(3), 94-107.
- Sackmann, A. S. (1991). Uncovering Culture in Organizations. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 27 (3), 295-317.
- Saunders, M.N.K. and Thornhill, A. (2004). Trust and mistrust in organizations: An exploration using an organizational justice framework. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 13(4), 493-515.
- Saunders, M.N.K., Skinner, D. and Lewicki, R.J. (2010) Emerging themes, implications for practice and directions for future research, in M.N.K. Saunders, D. Skinner, G. Dietz, N. Gillespie and R.J. Lewicki (eds) *Organizational trust: A cultural perspective*, 407-23, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schoorman, F.D., Mayer, R.C. and Davis, J.H. (2007). An integrative model of organizational trust: past present and future. *Academy of Management Review* 32(2), 344-354.
- Searle, R.H. and Skinner, D. (eds) (2011). *Trust and Human Resource Management*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Silverman, D. (2011). *Interpreting qualitative data* (4<sup>th</sup> edn). London: SAGE.
- Sitkin, S.B. and Roth, N. (1993). Explaining the limited effectiveness of legalistic remedies for trust/distrust. *Organization Science*. 4(3), 367-92.
- Sørensen, O.H., Hasle, P and Pejtersen, J.H (2011). Trust relations in management of change. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 27, 405-17.
- Strätling, R., Dietz, G and Wijnbenga, F (2011). The impact of contracts on trust in entrepreneur-VC relationships. *International Small Business Journal* 20(10), 1-21.
- Von Eye, A. and Mun, E.Y. (2005). *Analyzing rater agreement: Manifest variable methods*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Whaley, A.L. & Longoria, R.A. (2009). Preparing card sort data for multidimensional scaling Analysis in social psychological research: A methodological approach. *The Journal of Social Psychology*. 149(2), 105-15.
- Whitener, E.M, Brodt, S.E., Korsgaard, M.A. and Werner, J.M. (1998). Managers as initiators of trust: an exchange relationship framework for understanding managerial trustworthy behavior. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 513-30.

**Table 1: Participants' profiles**

Participant type	County		District		Total	
	initial sample	final sample*	initial sample	final sample*	initial sample	final sample*
Senior Managers	3	2	3	3	6	5
Middle Managers/ Professionals	18	15	16	16	34	31
Junior (administrative, clerical or technical employees)	13	11	11	9	24	20
Total	34	28	30	28	64	56

**Note:**

\*Excludes 8 participants who had multiple trust or distrust foci.

**Table 2: Emotions included in the card sort**

Card-sort category	Card-sort words/phrases
Trust and distrust	trusting, distrustful
Expressions of high trust	confident, faithful, hopeful
Manifestations of high trust	assured/passive*, take the initiative/hesitant*
Expressions of high distrust	cynical, fearful, sceptical
Manifestations of high distrust	wary and watchful, vigilant
Other emotions	angry, calm, cheerful, comfortable, concerned, confused, demoralised, depressed, determined, disinterested, eager, enthusiastic, excited, expectant, frustrated, in control, indifferent, insecure, involved, keen, on edge, optimistic, overwhelmed, panicky, positive, powerless, relaxed, relieved, resentful, resigned, secure, stressed, under pressure, vulnerable, worried

**Notes:**

Source of expressions and manifestations: Lewicki et al (1998); source of other emotions: Saunders and Thornhill (2004).

\*Following Lewicki et al. (1998) the first word is the manifestation of High Trust, the second the manifestation of Low Trust. For all other words and phrases related to High Trust (and High Distrust), Low Trust (and Low Distrust) is represented by none or absence.

**Table 3: Trustors' focus of trust and distrust**

<b>Trust/Distrust focus</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>Distrust</b>
Colleagues (in general)	5	-
Middle Management (general)	-	2
Line Manager (specific person)	2	1
Senior Management (general)	6	10
Senior Manager (specific person)	-	1
Chief Executive Officer (specific person)	2	-
Organisation	11	4
Total single focus	26	18
Multiple	4	4
Total single + multiple foci	30	22

**Note:**

*Excludes 11 participants who did not feel 'trusting' or 'distrustful' (Low Trust/Low Distrust) and 1 participant who felt both 'trusting' and 'distrustful' to some extent (Weak Trust/Weak Distrust) in relation to their Line Manager.*

**Table 4: Trustors' self-categorisation as 'trusting' and 'distrustful'**

		'distrustful'				Total
		not felt (absent)	feel to some extent	feel strongly	feel most strongly	
		<b>Low Distrust</b>	<b>Weak Distrust</b>	<b>High Distrust</b>		
<b>'trusting'</b>	feel most strongly	1	-	-	-	1
	feel strongly	9	-	-	-	9
	feel to some extent	16	1	-	-	17
	not felt (absent)	11	11	7	-	29
<b>Total</b>		37	12	7	-	56

Key:  = Low Trust/High Distrust;  = Low Trust/ Low Distrust;  
 = High Trust/ Low Distrust;  = Weak Trust and/or Weak Distrust

*Note: Excludes 8 participants who had multiple trust or distrust foci.*

**Table 5: Expressions and manifestations felt by Weak Trust/Low Distrust and High Trust/Low Distrust trustors**

Trusting (but not distrustful)...	Weak Trust		High Trust				All trusting (n=26)	Felt, at least to some extent
	Not felt	Trusting to some extent (n=16) Felt, at least to some extent	Not felt	Strongly trusting (n=8) Felt, at least to some extent	Not felt	Most strongly trusting (n=2) Felt, at least to some extent		
Hopeful	2	14	1	7	-	2	3	<b>23</b>
Faithful	7	9	1	7	-	2	8	<b>18</b>
Confident	1	15	-	8	-	2	1	<b>25</b>
Assured	2	14	1	7	-	2	3	<b>23</b>
Take initiative	-	16	-	8	-	2	-	<b>26</b>
Fearful	16	-	8	-	2	-	<b>26</b>	-
Sceptical	9	7	5	3	1	1	<b>16</b>	10
Cynical	10	6	5	3	2	-	<b>17</b>	9
Wary and watchful	9	7	5	3	2	-	<b>16</b>	10
Vigilant	4	12	1	7	1	1	<b>6</b>	20

**Notes:**

*Bold indicates expected responses according to Lewicki et al. (1998). Shaded area indicates where over half of responses concur with this.*

*Excludes 4 participants who had multiple trust foci.*



**Table 6: Expressions and manifestations felt by Low Trust/Weak Distrust and Low Trust/High Distrust trustors (only includes those who had a single focus)**

Distrustful (but not trusting)...	Weak Distrust		High Distrust					
	Distrustful to some extent (n=11)		Strongly distrustful (n=7)		Most strongly distrustful (n=0)		All distrustful (n=18)	
Expression/ manifestation:	Not felt	Felt, at least to some extent	Not felt	Felt, at least to some extent	Not felt	Felt, at least to some extent	Not felt	Felt, at least to some extent
Hopeful	6	5	3	4	-	-	<b>9</b>	9
Faithful	10	1	4	3	-	-	<b>14</b>	4
Confident	8	3	5	2	-	-	<b>13</b>	5
Passive	10	1	6	1	-	-	16	<b>2</b>
Hesitant	5	6	3	4	-	-	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>
Fearful	9	2	4	3	-	-	13	<b>5</b>
Sceptical	4	7	1	6	-	-	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>
Cynical	3	8	1	6	-	-	4	<b>14</b>
Wary and watchful	3	8	-	7	-	-	3	<b>15</b>
Vigilant	5	6	3	4	-	-	8	<b>10</b>

**Notes:**

*Bold indicates expected responses according to Lewicki et al. (1998). Shaded area indicates where over half of responses concur with this.*

*Excludes 4 participants who had multiple distrust foci.*

**Table 7: Expressions and manifestations felt by Low Trust/Low Distrust trustors**

Neither trusting nor distrustful	Low Trust/Low Distrust (n=11)	
	Not felt	Felt, at least to some extent
Hopeful	<b>4</b>	7
Faithful	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>
Confident	<b>4</b>	7
Passive	10	<b>1</b>
Hesitant	7	<b>4</b>
Fearful	<b>10</b>	1
Sceptical	<b>7</b>	4
Cynical	<b>7</b>	4
Wary and watchful	<b>5</b>	6
Vigilant	<b>5</b>	6

**Note:**

*Bold indicates expected responses according to Lewicki et al. (1998). Shaded area indicates where over half of responses concur with this.*