Original Papers

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Perceived competence and warmth influence respect, liking and trust in work relations

Abstract: *Many studies confirmed the positive effect of trust on human relations and performance in organizations. As a social judgment, trust should be related to perceived competence and warmth as two basic dimensions of person perception. Surprisingly, to date no attempts have been made to examine the influence of attributed competence and warmth on social judgments in interpersonal relations at work. To this end, we examine the influence of perceived competence and warmth on trust, liking and respect in upward and downward work relations. A study involving 190 middle-stage managers revealed that the two fundamental dimensions of social cognition (competence and warmth) influence respect, liking and trust. Competence had a stronger effect on respect than warmth; the opposite was true for liking. Trust was conditioned by both competence and warmth to an equal, high extent. At the same time, warmth expressed by supervisors led to higher results in liking, respect and trust in them than warmth expressed by subordinates.*

Key words: *trust, competence, organizational trust, liking, social judgment, respect, warmth*

Introduction

Observing behaviours of others is an easily accessible source of information about people, which enables us to attribute to them unobservable traits. Many studies indicate the existence of the two fundamental dimensions in which traits can be categorized: competence (agency) and warmth (communion) (Abele, Rupprecht, & Wojciszke, 2008; Abele, Uchronski, Suitner, & Wojciszke, 2008; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Bruckmüller & Abele, 2013; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Competence refers to efficacy, ambition, rivalry, instrumentality, success in achieving goals and independence. Warmth denotes consideration, empathy, sincerity, benevolence and support (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2008). Recent studies suggest that each of the two dimensions might diverge into two sub-dimensions. According to this concept, leadership and competence constitute the agency dimension, while morality and sociability build the communion dimension (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Bertolotti, Catellani, Douglas, & Sutton, 2013; Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011). It has been demonstrated that competence and warmth influence social judgments in a different manner: respect depends more on perceived competence, whereas liking is based more on perceived warmth (Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). However, it remains unclear whether the two fundamental dimensions of social cognition influence judgments on targets' trustworthiness in an organizational setting.

Although trustworthiness is most often regarded as a warmth-related trait, classical works enable us to assume that trust does not belong to either of the two dimensions. In their study, Rosenberg, Nelson, and Vivekananthan (1968) have shown that most of the traits (formerly used by Asch, 1946) were grouped in the two dimensions of intellectually and socially desirable, except for the traits 'reliable' and 'honest', which can be considered as synonyms of 'trustworthy' (not explicitly examined by Rosenberg and colleagues). In more recent studies, it has been shown that trustworthiness, together with competence and likeability (warmth-related trait) can be assessed from facial appearance and that, in the case of trustworthiness, these judgments can be formulated faster, with minimal time of exposure, and remain consistent in time-unconstrained conditions (Todorov, Pakrashi, & Oosterhof, 2009; Willis & Todorov, 2006). Additionally, the human face can be a reliable source of information

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about trustworthiness even when it is presented below the threshold of objective awareness (Todorov et al., 2009). Therefore, trust might be a more intuitive judgment when compared with competence and warmth.

In the literature, trust is considered one of the most important factors regulating human functioning in an organization. Former studies confirmed its positive impact on citizenship behaviours (McAllister, 1995; Singh & Srivastava, 2009), cooperation (Sargent & Waters, 2004; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Simpson, 2007; Zaheer, Mcevily, & Perrone, 1998), information and knowledge sharing (Matzler & Renzl, 2006), employee satisfaction (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Gulati & Sytch, 2007), performance and effort (Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002; Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007), leadership effectiveness (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Gillespie & Mann, 2004) and successful negotiation (Lee, Yang, & Graham, 2006; Olekalns & Smith, 2007). While a growing body of evidence is focused on the direct or indirect (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001) effects of trust on a wide range of indices of quality of work, still little has been done to distinguish trust from related social judgments, also observed in business reality, i.e. liking and respect. Most conceptualizations of trust (for a review, see Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012) comprise two key elements: (1) positive expectations of the other party; and (2) willingness to be vulnerable to his or her actions (Davis, Schoorman, Mayer, & Tan, 2000; Langfred, 2004; Mayer et al., 1995; Mayer & Gavin, 2005; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). Thus, in contrast with liking and respect, trust reflects a readiness for certain behaviours based on a positive perception of the target. To date, no attempts have been made to verify whether judgments on target's trustworthiness are conditioned by the fundamental dimensions of social perception or whether this conditioning distinguishes trust from liking and respect.

Therefore, the aim of the current study is to investigate the perceptual determinants of the three social judgments, respect, liking and trust, which are considered to be key factors shaping positive human relations in an organizational environment. To fully capture the entirety of organizational relations, we test social perception as the determinant of trust, liking and respect in upward and downward relationships by including the perception of supervisors and subordinates in this study. We expect to replicate findings presented earlier by Wojciszke and collaborators (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Wojciszke et al., 2009) and to extend them by showing that trust, as a relationship incorporating risk, depends on more varied premises, that is both agency and communion.

Materials and methods

Participants

The study involved 190 participants (85 women and 105 men) who were middle-stage managers from Poland with real-life experience in relations with both supervisors and subordinates. They constituted the sample of convenience and were recruited from listeners in postgraduate studies at economical and business universities. All participants provided written informed consent before their inclusion in the study. Their ages ranged from 24 to 53 years (M = 33.7, SD = 6.9) and tenure ranged from one to thirty years (M = 10.3, SD = 6.6).

Study design and manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions. We used a 2 (high vs. low competence) x 2 (high vs. low warmth) x 2 (subordinate vs. supervisor) experimental design. All factors were between-subject factors. Competence and warmth were manipulated by altering the behavioural content of the half-page descriptions of a person, introduced as a hypothetical supervisor or subordinate. Each participant read one description of a person in the role of either a supervisor or a subordinate, described in terms of either high or low competence and either high or low warmth. The thread of each story concentrated on a project meeting. High competence was induced by stating that a milestone task within a serious project was completed before the deadline, largely due to his work, and that his report was precise. Conversely, low competence was suggested by mentioning that a person's work caused a week's delay in completing the milestone task and that his report was vague. High warmth was depicted by stating that he supported his colleague when he faced a difficult situation and opted for social outings with the team. In contrast, low warmth was depicted by stating that he refused to support his colleague in a difficult situation and gave up on social outings with the team.

Procedure

Participants were asked to read a half-page long story describing their hypothetical subordinate or supervisor. Consequently they rated to what extent they liked, respected and trusted this person using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 7 (*I totally agree*). Bearing in mind the very limited applicability of trust scales in organization settings research (McEvily & Tortoriello, 2012), we decided to involve the scale independent of the context and directly related to the measured construct. The scale comprised five general statements (1. "I could trust this person"; 2. "This person wouldn't let me down"; 3. "I think this person is reliable"; 4. "In a difficult situation, I could rely on such person"; 5. "I think this person is loyal to others"). Scales used to measure liking and respect in this study were based on those described by Wojciszke, Abele, and Baryla (2009) (except for the trust scale). Respect was measured on a four-items scale (1. "I respect this person"; 2. "This person deserves admiration"; 3. "This person could serve as an example for others"; 4. "I think this person is somebody to look up to") and four items were involved to measure liking (1. "I have warm feelings about this person"; 2. "I like this person"; 3. "I feel close to this person"; 4. "I would be happy to spend time with this person"). To be able to verify the effectiveness of the manipulation, we controlled the level of perceived agency (sample items: "He is efficient"; "He is well organized") and communion (sample items: "He is helpful"; "He approaches other

people's problems with benevolence"). Participants rated perceived agency and communion by using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*He is definitely not like that*) to 7 (*He is definitely like that*). At the end of the experiment, participants provided basic demographic information, including their sex, age and tenure.

We totalled the values of the dependent variables in order to obtain indicators of trust, liking, respect, perceived agency and perceived communion. The scales were found to be highly reliable (trust: Cronbach's α = 0.94; respect: Cronbach's α = 0.94; liking: Cronbach's α = 0.92; competence: Cronbach's α = 0.95; warmth: Cronbach's α = 0.96).
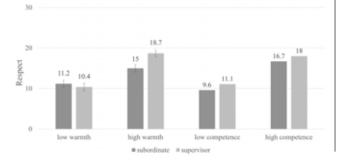
Results

Manipulation effectiveness

We found a main effect of competence manipulation on perceived competence ($F(1, 186) = 394.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .68$) and no main effect of competence manipulation on perceived warmth ($F(1, 186) = 2.3$, $p > .05$). There was a main effect of warmth manipulation on perceived warmth ($F(1, 186) = 372.9$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .67$) and no effect on perceived competence ($F(1, 186) = .07$, $p > .05$). We did not find any interaction effects of the manipulated dimensions of social perception on perceived competence or warmth ($p > .05$). Obtained results confirmed that our manipulation was effective. Data did not reveal any effects of gender, age or tenure on any of the dependent variables and for this reason all data was combined for future analyses.

Respect

Multivariate analysis of variance revealed the main effect of all three manipulated factors: competence ($F(1, 182) = 115$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$), warmth ($F(1, 182) = 78.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$) and position ($F(1, 182) = 5$, $p < .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$) on respect, suggesting that both social perception and the position of the target influenced respect. Comparison of the effect sizes suggests that social perception in each dimension is a stronger predictor of respect than position in the hierarchy. Furthermore, we found a significant interaction of manipulated warmth and position on respect ($F(1, 182) = 12.1$, $p < .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$), indicating a more significant increase of respect for warm supervisors as compared to subordinates (see Figure 1). No interaction between manipulated competence and position was found ($F(1, 182) = .01$, $p > .05$).
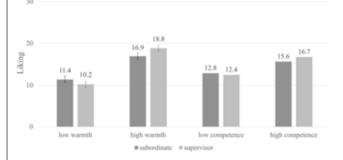
Figure 1. Respect for a supervisor and a subordinate depending on perceived warmth and competence

Liking

Both manipulated competence ($F(1, 182) = 27.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$) and warmth ($F(1, 182) = 109.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .38$) had a significant impact on liking, but position had no effect ($F(1, 182) = .24$, $p > .05$). We found significant interaction of manipulated warmth and position on liking ($F(1, 182) = 5.6$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$), suggesting that supervisors are liked more by others when they express their warmth than warm subordinates (see Figure 2). We found no interaction between manipulated competence and position ($F(1, 182) = 1.2$, $p > .05$).
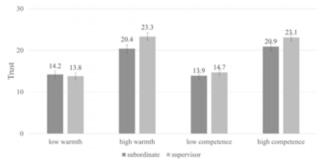
Figure 2. Liking of a supervisor and a subordinate depending on perceived competence and warmth

Trust

Analysis of variance revealed main effects (of equal strength) of manipulated competence ($F(1, 182) = 77.3$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$) and warmth ($F(1, 182) = 78.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$) on trust. The position of the target had no main effect on trust ($F(1, 182) = 2.7$, $p > .05$). We noted a significant interaction effect between manipulated warmth and position on trust ($F(1, 182) = 4.9$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$), suggesting that supervisors are more trusted than subordinates when expressing warmth (see Figure 3). No significant interaction effects between manipulated competence and position or manipulated competence and manipulated warmth were found.

Figure 3. Trust in a supervisor and a subordinate depending on perceived competence and warmth

Discussion

To our knowledge, the current study is the first to examine the joint impact of competence and warmth on trust in work relations. The study compares conditioning of trust with the remaining two types of social relationship,

i.e. liking and respect. We found that the two fundamental dimensions of social cognition might be helpful in predicting interpersonal relations at work; however, they did not allow clear distinction of trust from respect and liking.

In our study, each of the analysed relationships turned out to be influenced by both competence and warmth. Comparison of the effect sizes suggests that behaviours suggesting warmth had a stronger effect on liking than behaviours suggesting competence, while behaviours suggesting competence had a stronger impact on respect than those indicating warmth. In this regard, our study managed to replicate the former findings (Wojciszke et al., 2009) and extend them by including trust in the model. Interestingly, trust turned out to be affected by the perception of both competence and warmth to an equal and high extent. A possible explanation is that a readiness to perform certain behaviours on the basis of trustworthiness attributed to the target might entail more risk. To reduce it, people might expect varied positive information about the trustee (i.e. competence- and warmth-related). Thus, trust may require information about both competence and warmth of the target, especially in the organizational context, where individual success depends not only on self-competence, but also on the competence of others (Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). Additionally, the influence of perceived competence on all three types of social judgment remains in line with previous findings, indicating that the organizational context might increase interest in the competence of others (Cislak, 2013; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008).

We also noted an interaction effect between warmth and position on each of the analysed judgments, showing that warmth expressed by managers led to their better liking, respect and trust than in the case of subordinates. Thus, warmth had a greater impact on general impression in the case of a supervisor than in a subordinate, which could indicate that endorsing a lower position in the organizational hierarchy involves greater expectation of communal behaviour from people holding higher positions. However, the other data suggest that managers are attributed higher competence than subordinates (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu, 2002). This implies that being an effective leader requires the ability to reconcile expectations coming from the organizational role (required to be a competent leader) and from relationships with team members (required to be a warm leader). Developing such an ability would require managers overcoming a tendency to pay less attention to their subordinates than the subordinates pay to the managers (Fiske, 1993) and expecting from the subordinates mainly agentic behaviour while being less interested in their communal behaviour (Cislak, 2013).

The current study failed to distinguish trust from liking and respect in work relationships since both are predicted by both perceived competence and warmth. Warmth and competence seem to be the two dimensions able to capture the complexity of social perception among people and, for this reason, remain general. The use of this universal construct has revealed that respect, liking and trust are subject to the same rules of social perception, although liking and respect can be predicted by perceived competence and warmth to a different degree. In the future, attempts could be made to verify whether the sub-dimensions of competence (i.e. leadership, competence), and warmth (i.e. sociability and morality) might be helpful to better understand the influence of social perception on the interpersonal relations of trust, liking and respect at work. For instance, it seems possible that trust (understood as a willingness to be vulnerable to the trustees' actions) might depend more on the perceived morality of the target than on his/her sociability. However, this requires further investigation.

The fact that judgments of respect, liking and trust were measured only with declarative statements might be considered a limitation of the current study. However, in this case, declarations were made by actual middle-stage managers who have daily experiences in building relationships with their supervisors and subordinates. Additionally, behaviours described in the stories were based on real-life situations which often happen in organizations. Future studies might continue to enjoy the benefits of doing research in this area and overcome this limitation by involving behavioural measures of social judgment.

Conclusions

The current study provides evidence that positive relations at work (i.e. respect, liking and trust) are based on the two fundamental dimensions of social perception (i.e. competence and warmth). Respect is mostly affected by perceived competence, while liking is mostly affected by perceived communion. Trust is affected by both perceived agency and perceived communion to an equal and high extent. Finally, perceived warmth influences positive judgments about supervisors more strongly than perceived competence.

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