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Understanding the Relationship between Cynicism and Trust

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Abstract

This article explores the nature of cynicism, its relationship to interpersonal trust, and how behavior influences the impact of cynicism on trust. We propose that cynicism represents an attitude composed of negative beliefs and feelings that influences individuals' perceptions of events and behavior, which in turn affect their trust. This process is likely to occur when situational cues are ambiguous. Three studies investigate this proposition. Using a projective task, Study 1 demonstrated that cynicism is associated with negative beliefs, feelings and a lack of trust. Study 2, a field survey, supported a mediating role for perceived events, measured in terms of met expectations, in the relationship between cynicism and trust. Study 3, an experiment in which we manipulated the trustworthy behavior of a referent, found that when the words and actions of others are clearly trustworthy or untrustworthy, cynicism has little influence on perceptions of trust, but when they are ambiguous, cynicism has a strong effect on the interpretation of behavior. The results indicate that cynicism biases interpretations of ambiguous events and behavior, thereby leading to lower trust but that strong trustworthy behavior mitigates the effect of cynicism on trust.

Understanding the Relationship between Cynicism and Trust

Considering the benefits of trust, it is not surprising that executives want to engender trust among members of their organizations (Buzzotta, 1998). Both empirical research and conceptual reviews show that trusting supervisor-subordinate relationships improve communication, performance, cooperation, and success of organizational interventions (Colquitt, Brent, & Lepine, 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; 2002; Korsgaard, Pitariu & Jeong, in press).

Despite these benefits, managers often make decisions or act in ways that undermine employees' trust (Buch, 1992; Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Pugh, Skarlicki, & Passell, 2003). For instance, they lay off long-term employees (Buch, 1992; Pugh, et al., 2003; Van Buren, 2000) and jump on management fad bandwagons (Gibson & Tesone, 2001). As well, they take credit for their subordinates' ideas or publicly humiliate others (Lang, 1998). Actions like these are more likely to inflame cynicism and destroy trust than to engender it (Buch, 1992; Dean et al., 1998; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). Even management's attempts to initiate potentially beneficial organizational change may be received by employees with distrust and cynicism (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997; Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000).

Managers' conduct and dealings with employees are crucial to developing and maintaining employee trust in management and goodwill toward the firm (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). Much of the research on the formation and maintenance of trust in management has focused on attributes and behavior of managers (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Whitener, et al., 1998). In comparison, with the exception of propensity to trust (Colquitt, Scott, & Lepine, 2007), there is relatively little research on employee characteristics as predictors of employees' trust in managers (Mayer, et al., 1995). Because trust is a perceptual

phenomenon, employee characteristics are likely to play a critical role in determining the level of trust employees have in managers. One potentially important employee characteristic is cynicism, which is prevalent in as much as 48 percent of the US workforce (Mirvis & Kanter, 1991) and seems to be growing (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Santich, 2003). We focus on cynicism not just because of its prevalence, however. Equally important is the commonly held belief that cynicism somehow interferes with attempts to build trust, combined with the general lack of empirical research to substantiate this claim.

The purpose of our paper is to examine the concept of cynicism and its relationship to trust. In particular, we clarify the nature of cynicism and its distinctness from trust, the mechanisms by which cynicism relates to trust, and the effect of managers' behavior on the relationship between cynicism and trust. We explore these issues in three studies. Study 1 examines the nature of cynicism, and the relationship between cynicism and perceptions of people and events. Using a projection paradigm (Butcher & Rouse, 1996; Stone, 1978), we study the relationship between cynicism, and beliefs, feelings, expectations, and trust, in the context of a hypothetical situation. Study 2 extends this examination to the relationships among cynicism, work perceptions, and trust among a sample of credit union employees. Finally, study 3 experimentally tests the effects of a key aspect of trustworthy behavior – i.e., open communication – on the relationship between cynicism and trust. A subset of managers from study 2 participated in this experiment.

Cynicism and the Perception of People and Events

Cynicism is an attitude or disposition that involves frustration, disillusionment and negative feelings toward a person, group, or organization (Andersson & Bateman, 1997). As this definition shows, cynicism has been alternately conceptualized as a trait (e.g., Wrightsman,

1992) or an attitude (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). Among organizational psychologists, (e.g., Andersson, 1996; Dean et al., 1998; Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003) cynicism is viewed as a learned, relatively enduring but changeable attitude stemming from one’s experiences of disappointment and even betrayal of expectations by others, society, and even oneself (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). Consistent with this view, we define cynicism as a relatively enduring attitude. As such, cynicism shares many features of current conceptions of attitudes, namely stable, memory-based evaluations as well as less stable evaluations constructed “online” as events occur (Albarracin, Johnson & Zanna, 2005). Moreover, definitions conceptualize the target of cynicism broadly as well as narrowly; for example, cynicism has been directed at a particular entity, such as an organization, at its leaders, at organizational change, and even at US business in general (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Bateman, Sakano & Fujita, 1992; Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003; Reichers et al., 1997). In this investigation, we examine both generalized and specific forms of cynicism.

Cynicism has both cognitive and affective elements (Dean et al., 1998). Specifically, it reflects negative beliefs (cognitions; Gurtman, 1992; Wrightsman, 1992) as well as negative feelings (affect; Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Dean et al., 1998) about the target of cynicism. For example, cynics hold negative beliefs about a target’s integrity (Dean, et al., 1998; Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003) and motives and character (Wanous et al., 2000). Similarly, Wanous et al (2000) found that cynicism was negatively related to employees’ instrumentality beliefs; that is employees’ beliefs about the link between performance and rewards. Thus, like current conceptions of attitudes (Albarracin, Zanna, Johnson, & Kumkale, 2005; Breckler, 1984; Zanna & Rempel, 1988), cynicism can be inferred from (and influence) affect and cognition.

As the above discussion suggests, cynicism is associated with certain unfavorable beliefs and feelings, which relate to the way individuals view and interpret situations. In other words, cynicism is likely to bias individuals' perceptions of events and people that might otherwise be viewed more favorably. An analogous process is described in the phenomenon of social projection (Kreuger, 2000). Social projection involves the transference or (mis)attribution of one's own motives, feelings and traits to others, quite unknowingly. Demonstrations of social projection typically involve assessing or priming a characteristic of interest and providing a neutral stimulus that participants then evaluate. For example, in a series of studies, Kawada et al. (2004) showed that individuals are more likely to impute certain motives (e.g., learning, performance, or competition goals) to hypothetical persons when the corresponding goals were either primed or indicated as prevalent.

Social projection can also involve projecting the *source* of one's own emotional state onto others (Holmes, 1981). Individuals who are in a fearful state, for example, tend to evaluate photographs of neutral faces as indicating anger (Manner et al., 2005). It should be noted that social projection does not necessarily involve a defensive mechanism (i.e., projection of negative characteristics while denying these same characteristics in oneself). In fact, research on social cognition shows that one's own beliefs and feelings are often used as a proxy for others, especially when there is little basis for knowing how others think or feel (Brodt, 1987; Brodt & Ross, 1998; Locksley, Hepburn, & Ortiz, 1982).

In a similar vein, we propose that elements of cynicism may be projected. If, as the definitions of cynicism described above suggest, it involves certain affective and cognitive elements that may bias the perception of people and events, these thoughts and feelings should

be projected onto new and especially ambiguous situations. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Cynicism will be related to negative beliefs, feelings, toward the target.

The relatively scant empirical work indicates that there is a strong, negative correlation between cynicism and trust (Gurtman, 1992; Pugh et al., 2003; Wrightsman, 1966). However, theory suggests that cynicism and interpersonal trust are conceptually distinct (Dean et al., 1998). As discussed above, cynicism is an attitude involving negative beliefs and feelings. Trust, however, is commonly defined as an attitude or belief involving a positive expectation about a target and willingness to make oneself vulnerable to that target (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998; Whitener, et al., 1998). Thus, whereas individuals can trust only when they are vulnerable to another party, they can be cynical without being vulnerable (Dean et al., 1998).

While conceptually distinct, theory suggests that cynicism and trust should be related. Specifically, because of its accessibility and its affective and cognitive elements, cynicism might negatively influence one's attributions and judgments of the target (Wanous et al., 2000). In other words, cynicism's negative perceptual frame or orientation may bias the processing of information regarding the target other. As a result, persons high in cynicism may be prone to unfavorable interpretations which are likely to lead to mistrust of the target. It is also possible, however, that trust and cynicism are reciprocally related in that mistrust in a manager may bias the interpretation of an event (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), which may reinforce cynicism. Therefore we posit a relationship between cynicism and trust:

Hypothesis 2: Cynicism will be negatively related to trust.

In study 1, we tested these hypotheses focusing on cynicism as an attitude (Dean et al., 1998), and more particularly, as a learned belief stored in memory about a specific target or situation. Cynicism is a response to the experience of disappointment (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989), and depending on their experiences, individuals develop cynicism toward specific entities such as organizations, organizational leaders, organizational change, US business in general, and society (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Bateman, et al., 1992; Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Mirvis & Kanter, 1989; 1991; Reichers et al., 1997). Because participants in study 1 were students, our focus was on cynicism toward student groups. These participants had sufficient experience with student group project work to have formed an attitude toward this specific target. In light of the prevalence of teams in the workplace, the influence of cynicism on cooperative behavior (Johnson & O-Leary-Kelly, 2003), and evidence that group-level trust affects group dynamics and work attitudes (e.g., Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Langfred, 2004), we believe that understanding the nature of cynicism about work groups is of practical and theoretical importance.

Study 1

Method

Participants and procedure. Data were collected as part of a larger study on group dynamics. Participants were advanced undergraduate students enrolled in the core curriculum of the business program at a university in the southeastern USA. As part of the course, all 320 enrolled students were required to participate in research as part of a student subject pool. To receive credit for participation, they signed up for three studies among several research opportunities offered that year. Of the possible 320 subjects, 229 volunteered for our project and completed the survey; of these, 208 had codable responses to the projective task. At the time of

the study, each student was a member of a five-person team working on a complex, semester-long group project; hence, all participants were in the middle of a meaningful group experience.

Participants completed a confidential web-based survey. The survey contained two parts: (1) fixed response items measuring several variables, including a measure of cynicism about work groups and demographic characteristics, and (2) a projective task designed to tap into participants' beliefs, feelings, and expectations about work groups. Upon completion of the survey, participants clicked on a button that saved their responses for later downloading by the experimenters.

Measures. Cynicism was measured using a modified version of the 8-item cynicism toward organizational change scale (created and validated by Reichers et al, 1997, and Wanous et al., 2000). We altered the wording of the cynicism measure to describe cynicism toward working in student groups (coefficient alpha = .88). Sample items include "Most student group projects usually do not turn out that well," "Ideas generated in student groups do not usually produce much real value," "Members of student groups usually do not try hard enough to do their part of the project," and "Members of student groups usually do not know enough about what they are doing."

To tap into participants' beliefs and feelings about work groups, we employed a projective technique similar to that used in research on social projection (e.g. Kawada et al. 2004). In keeping with this methodology, we presented participants with a neutral stimulus. Specifically, the web survey contained a photograph of an unfamiliar work group with instructions to describe what was occurring in the group (See Appendix). In social projection research, participants' evaluations of the stimulus are often obtained in the form of fixed response ratings. Given that cynicism was measured using a fixed response format, we opted to

use an open ended format to minimize the potential for common method bias. Thus, participants entered their descriptions into an expandable text box in the web survey. The responses were then content coded.

Consistent with attitude theory, cynicism is conceptualized to consist of three components, cognitive, affective and behavioral. We coded participants' responses for the cognitive and affective components. The narrative did not allow for an assessment of participants' behavioral intentions because they were describing the actions of others, not themselves. These coding scales for cognitive and affective components were developed and refined using pilot responses to the photograph. The cognitive scale measured the extent to which participants' projections reflected *negative beliefs about others* (e.g., questioning the motives and intention of group members). Using a 5-point scale, raters assessed the overall degree of negative inferences and beliefs about the individuals in the photograph expressed in each participant's narrative (1 = *conveys no negative assumptions*, 5 = *conveys very negative assumptions*). The affective scale measured the extent to which the stories conveyed *negative feelings*, using a 5-point scale (1 = *does not convey negative emotions*, 5 = *conveys very negative emotions*).

Two trained raters, who were blind to the hypotheses, made independent assessments. The intraclass correlation coefficients indicated an acceptable level of agreement between the raters (negative beliefs: ICC = .28; negative feelings: ICC = .31). The coders' ratings were averaged to form a separate index for each dimension (i.e. negative beliefs, negative feelings, and expectations).

Finally, trust was measured by a two item scale by asking participants to assess the extent to which they trusted their student project groups, using a 7-point scale (e.g., "I find it difficult to