

Fall 2023

Experimentally Examining Status and Initial Trust

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EXPERIMENTALLY EXAMINING STATUS AND INITIAL TRUST

by

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Bachelor of Science
Texas A&M University, 2019

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Sociology

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2023

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ABSTRACT

Trust is a fundamental component of our social relationships. Whether we are interacting with our strong social ties, like family and friends, or complete strangers, there is a degree of trust that we must place in the other person. Because trust is essential to our continued interactions it is important that we learn how this trust forms as well as how it is influenced by various social factors. This paper utilizes an experimental approach to examining the relationship between status and initial trust. Using a two condition experiment with 182 participants, this study found that the presence of a single status difference did not influence levels of initial trust between complete strangers when asked to work collectively on a task. In fact, many participants demonstrated moderate to high levels of initial trust which supports previous research that has found that we often exhibit higher levels of initial trust to unknown others.

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CHAPTER 1: EXPERIMENTALLY EXAMINING STATUS AND INITIAL TRUST INTRODUCTION

Trust is a fundamental aspect of our social relationships with one another (Lewis & Weigert, 2012; Weber & Carter, 2003; Robbins, 2016). As social beings, we routinely interact with a multitude of individuals who range from those that we have close and personal relationships with, like friends and family members, to complete strangers that we have never met before. Of course, we theoretically should have high levels of trust towards those that we have strong social ties with, as the decision to trust another person is often thought to be a deliberate process where it is argued that levels of trust will initially start off low but increase over time through continued interaction (Jones & George, 1998; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). But how do we form our initial level of trust towards strangers? Is there a base threshold of trust that is extended to all strangers or does our initial level of trust differ from individual to individual? Research suggests that our initial level of trust towards a stranger is dependent on the information that we receive from our immediate perceptions and interactions with said stranger.

Past research examining initial trust, or trust that is not based on any prior experience and/or knowledge of the other person, has found that acts of distrust that occur in the beginning of a relationship reduce levels of trust in a partner more than when acts of distrust occur later in the relationship (Lount et al., 2008). Another study, utilizing

a traditional trust game, found that when individuals were initially only partially trusted this was associated with lower rates of reciprocity in comparison to when individuals were given complete initial trust (Pillutla, Malthtra, & Murnighan, 2003). These findings demonstrate how initial trust can have downstream consequences for relationship formation. So, contrary to the idea that levels of trust start low and increase over time, people often exhibit higher levels of initial trust towards unknown others (Kramer & Lewicki, 2010), trust which can then quickly be degraded.

As we can see here, trust is not only fundamental for our relationships with our close social ties but can also apply to other types of relationships, such as professional ones. In organizational settings, trust is especially important in helping to facilitate smooth interactions between individuals, groups, and the larger organization. It is important to consider that individuals are often operating within status hierarchies in these organizational settings (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). With each interaction individuals gain social information about all actors that are involved, and this information can influence one's perceptions, beliefs, and expectations which consequently impacts their overall understanding of the social world around them. One important source of information that is present during our interactions with others is relayed through status characteristics. Status characteristics can be thought of as socially significant attributes that differentiate individuals based on widely held beliefs that associate greater "social worthiness and competence" to one category over another (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). These status characteristics hold particular meanings, or sentiments, that provide actors

with information on how one ought to think, act, or behave, in a given situation (Berger et al., 1977; Ridgeway et al., 1998; Ridgeway & Erikson, 2000). And given their ubiquity as a source of information, I predict that these status characteristics may be very influential in determining our initial level of trust toward a stranger.

Given the preceding discussion, I propose the following research questions. Since trust is a fundamental component of building social relationships, how do status characteristics, and the meanings that are associated with particular characteristics, influence trust? More specifically, how do status characteristics influence levels of initial trust when working with a complete stranger? To answer these questions, I conducted an in-person experiment with 182 participants that examined how perceptions of competence associated with diffuse status characteristics influence one's initial trust towards a stranger. In this paper I discuss past literature examining trust, status characteristics and expectations states theory as well as the fundamental dimensions that make up the stereotype content model. I then describe the methods used to test my hypotheses about the relationship between status and trust, followed by a discussion of study results. Finally, I will conclude by considering the implications of these findings and outlining suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust

Since trust is a fundamental part of our daily lives, many disciplines have attempted to conceptualize what trust is and how it works. Philosophers have constructed various models of trust (Jones, 1996; Hardin, 2002) including one that is commitment based (Hawley, 2014). The commitment-based account can be used to think about

interpersonal trust when one person chooses to trust that another person will do what is expected of them in a given situation. In this definition of trust there are two main components: one, the belief that the person being trusted (i.e., the trustee) is committed to doing what is expected of them and two, the trustor relies upon the trustee to meet that commitment. This account helps to identify not only when trust is applicable, but also when it has been violated.

Although trust is an active focus of research across many disciplines, there is little consensus about the origins of trust, or how we ought to conceptualize trust in research (Robbins, 2016). In an attempt to standardize conceptualizations of trust, Robbins (2016) proposed a structural-cognitive model of relational trust. In this model, trust can be impacted by four components: 1) the trustor's characteristics, 2) the trustee's characteristics, 3) characteristics of the exchange relationship between the trustor and trustee, and 4) characteristics of forces external to the exchange relationship between actors. Previous literature has begun to examine how these components, in combination and individually, influence trust (Campos-Castillo & Ewoodzie, 2014; Lount, 2010). This project will focus on how the trustor's characteristics as well as the trustee's characteristics influence levels of initial trust, specifically when it comes to characteristics that hold socially created status value. Currently, the trust literature does not often reference or take into account how status and competency perceptions might impact the formation of trust. This project attempts to experimentally examine this missing link through the inclusion of status characteristics.

Status Characteristics and Expectations States

Expectations states and status characteristics theories examine how individuals use information about others to create expectations about their abilities or behaviors in small group settings. In other words, this set of theories was developed to explain how patterns of inequalities in power and prestige behaviors emerge and are reinforced in small problem-solving groups (Bales, 1950; Bales, 1953; Bales & Slater, 1955; Harvey, 1953; Whyte, 1943; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). Research utilizing status characteristic theories have found that inequalities in power and prestige are correlated with group member evaluations of specific performances, where participants often ranked high status individuals as having higher levels of performance, regardless of actual performance capabilities (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; Berger et al., 1998).

Status characteristics theory predicts that an observable power and prestige order of the behavioral inequalities will emerge during group interactions (Berger 1958; Berger & Conner 1966, 1969; Berger et al., 1972). This power-prestige order consists of 1) action opportunities, 2) performance outputs, 3) reward actions, and 4) influence. These four components make up the observable power and prestige (OPP) order of the group and make up the possible dependent variables in expectation states research. Differences in these four OPP components indicate varying levels of power and prestige among the group members when working on a task, thus influencing their perceived status within the group hierarchy. However, there are certain scope conditions that these groups operate under, thus defining the situational conditions under which this theory is expected to hold (Berger et al., 1972; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). First, groups must be task oriented, meaning the whole group is working on a task whose outcome is valued by the group members. Second, the members of the group are collectively

oriented, meaning they care about the task at hand, thus viewing it as legitimate and necessary to take each other's behavior into account when working on the task.

Status characteristics theory examines the evolution of a status organizing process, in which evaluations and beliefs about particular status characteristics of relevant actors become foundations for inequalities during interaction (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). Status characteristics are defined as any characteristic around which beliefs and expectations about actors come to be organized. These characteristics can be categorized as specific status characteristics or diffuse status characteristics, both of which hold specific or general performance expectations. Diffuse status characteristics are characteristics that can be stereotypically evaluated as possessing hi- or lo- status values. Examples of diffuse status characteristics include, but are not limited to, race, gender, age, and education.

If all scope conditions are met, this theory assumes a four-step burden of proof process: 1) If a diffuse status characteristic is the only differentiating characteristic between actors then it becomes activated. 2) If a characteristic is activated then it becomes relevant to the task at hand. 3) If a characteristic is seen as relevant to the task, then the evaluation states of either hi- or lo- status associated with each characteristic category corresponds to expectations for success on the task. In other words, status evaluations are generalized from one situation to the next, where high status often corresponds to expectations for high performance. And finally, 4) the observable power and prestige order will directly reflect the evaluation status of the status characteristic within the interaction among actors (Berger, et al. 1977; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). This burden of proof process occurs, thus creating inequality, unless another process

intervenes. This burden of proof process can also be thought of as a manifestation of stereotyping in collectively and task-oriented small groups.

Stereotype Content Model

Stereotypes are widely held beliefs that represent oversimplified and general sentiments regarding a particular type of person, category, or group of people (Fiske, 2015, 2018). The stereotype content model (SCM) was developed to identify the fundamental underlying dimensions that help explain some shared experiences (Fiske et al. 2002; Fiske 2013, 2018). This model proposes two fundamental dimensions of social perception: 1) warmth, which involves how we perceive another's intentions, and 2) competence, or how we perceive their capability to act on said intentions. The warmth dimension is associated with sociability, trust, and morality. Thus, this dimension is about whether the stereotyped individual has benign intentions (Fiske, 2018). On the other hand, the competence dimension is associated with capability, agency, and autonomy, as this dimension considers one's ability to act on their intentions and desires (Fiske, 2018). With two fundamental dimensions this model identifies four subcategories: 1) admiration (hi- warmth & hi- competence), 2) envious prejudice (lo- warmth & hi- competence), 3) paternalistic prejudice (hi- warmth & lo- competence), and 4) contemptuous prejudice (lo- warmth & lo- competence) (Fiske et al. 2002). These four combinations of warmth and competence can be used to categorize different groups of people based on perceptions associated with the characteristics they hold, for instance ethnic groups (Bergsieker et al. 2012; Lee & Fiske 2006). The larger social structure of a society will determine what sentiments make up this stereotype content, which can impact whether complete strangers are viewed as "friend or foe" (Fiske, 2015, 2018). Notably, since

competence and warmth are universal dimensions of meaning, they should influence our evaluations of others' status, as well as the extent to which we can trust them.

Past literature on status characteristics does not often discuss concepts of warmth, trust, or trustworthiness, while past literature on trust does not often discuss ideas of status or competence. Using an experimental approach, I am proposing a way to examine whether status characteristics influence levels of initial trust. Building off the stereotype content model, I expect that status characteristics will influence both competence and warmth perceptions. By combining what we know about status characteristics, stereotype formation, and perceptions of trust, we can use the arguments outlined below to examine the extent to which competence perceptions associated with status characteristic categories influence trust, specifically regarding our initial trust in strangers.

STATUS AND TRUST

For this project, status refers to the relative social standing of an individual, group, or category, based on widespread and normative cultural beliefs. Here status is differentiated in terms of hi- or lo- overall social value. Status characteristics refer to particular qualities that differentiate individuals from one another in which each characteristic category is associated with either hi- or lo- evaluations of social value, relative to the other categories. This means that these characteristic categories can be thought of as ordered on a hierarchy of social value. As mentioned earlier, status characteristics are often classified as either diffuse or specific. For this project we will primarily be referring to diffuse status characteristics when discussing status differences. This is not to say that specific status characteristics do not influence initial trust but rather

diffuse status characteristics are more applicable to the scope conditions being used in the proposed study.

Furthermore, trust refers to the belief or expectation that the actor being entrusted has benign intentions and will treat the individual in a benevolent manner that is consistent with these preconceived expectations, even when they have an incentive to do otherwise (Robbins, 2016; Cook et al., 2005; Hardin, 2002). And finally, initial trust refers to trust that is not based on any prior experience or knowledge of the entity being entrusted.

Existing literature examining the relationship between a person's social status and trust has presented mixed findings regarding this relationship (Dahlhaus & Schlosser, 2021). Some studies have examined the extent to which an individual's status impacts how they trust, and found that the relationship between generalized trust and social status is associated with a positive correlation (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Brandt et al., 2015), where people with higher status have a stronger inclination to trust. However, other studies that measured trust as a behavior found a negative correlation, where people with a lower social status demonstrated trust more often (Piff et al., 2010). Other studies have examined the extent to which an individual's status influences how trustworthy others perceive them to be, and found that higher status individuals were considered to be less trustworthy in comparison to lower status individuals (Salgado et al., 2021). But this finding contradicts other research that has found that higher status individuals tend to be seen as more trustworthy, even among lower-status individuals (Samson, 2018). In an experimental setting, past research has found evidence of in-group favoritism among hi-status groups, as hi-status participants trusted other hi-status individuals more than

lo-status individuals (Samson, 2018; Lei & Vesely, 2010). On the other hand, lo-status participants also trusted hi-status individuals more than other lo-status or same-status individuals.

Previous research examining levels of initial trust has found that people often exhibit high levels of trust towards strangers despite the argument that trust must be built over time (Lewicki et al. 2006). Some researchers have argued that this occurs due to social norms of respect (Dunning et al., 2014), where individuals believe that they should show respect for another person's moral character by giving them the "benefit of doubt" through high levels of initial trust, despite being complete strangers. Alternatively, other research that has examined the relationship between the status of a trustee and how it impacts levels of initial trust, have found that the belief that others have positive intentions, or are perceived to be benevolent, mediates the relationship between status and trust (Lount & Pettit, 2012). However, I would like to test this relationship between status and initial trust in the opposite direction. How does the status of the stranger, or the person being trusted, impact levels of initial trust?

I am proposing that perceptions of competence, which is a component of status that has not been thoroughly examined in relation to trust within previous research, plays an influential role in determining levels of initial trust when working on a collective task with complete strangers. In this case, status characteristics serve as a source of information to individuals during their interactions with strangers. The information provided by status characteristics differentiates the categories of the characteristic into a hierarchy that attaches evaluations of hi- or lo- cultural status value. From these evaluations, information about one's perceived competence and warmth will be conveyed

through the characteristics that one possesses. The level of initial trust that an individual places in a complete stranger will vary based on the information that they receive from their given situation via status characteristics. And finally, when perceptions of warmth are held constant, level of initial trust will become dependent on perceptions of competence given by an activated status characteristic, where hi-status characteristics will be associated with higher levels of initial trust and lo-status characteristics will be associated with lower levels of initial trust. In this case, competency perceptions will

HYPOTHESES AND SCOPE CONDITIONS

From this line of thinking, I propose the following hypotheses that will be empirically tested. First, I hypothesize that partners with the hi-status diffuse status characteristic (DSC) will be evaluated as more competent than partners possessing the lo-status DSC, and vice versa (H1). This hypothesis is consistent with assumptions and findings from past research within expectation states theory (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; Ridgeway & Erikson, 2000; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). Since this study is still referring to task oriented and collectively oriented small groups, the scope conditions for expectations states theory are met, thus, I expect to find these same trends in terms of competence evaluations based on status characteristics.

For my next hypothesis, I will control for perceptions of warmth in my analysis to focus solely on whether status influences trust via its impact on perceived competence. Here I hypothesize that when warmth perceptions are held constant, participants will have higher levels of trust towards hi-status partners in comparison to lo-status partners, and vice versa (H2). This hypothesis encompasses the proposed direct relationship between competency expectations associated with different status characteristic

categories and levels of initial trust. Finally, I am hypothesizing that perceptions of competence will mediate the effects of status on levels of initial trust (H3).

All of these hypotheses will be empirically tested using the experimental design described below. However, before moving to the experimental design I describe several scope conditions. First, the actors within the interaction must be complete strangers to one another. Any previous interactions could serve as a source of additional information that the individual could use when establishing levels of trust towards the other actor. Second, there must be an activated status characteristic present. This means the actors must differ in terms of a particular status characteristic and this characteristic must be the only differentiating factor that is noticeable and relevant to the situation. Third, there must be a task or situation in which the individual and stranger can trust each other. And fourth, the actors must care about the task or situation at hand. It must be seen as legitimate or necessary to all actors involved. Following these scope conditions, we can empirically test this theory and the conditions under which it applies using the following experimental design.

METHODS

Experimental Design

To empirically test how status characteristics influence levels of initial trust, I used a two condition in-person experiment. Although students physically came into the Sociology Department Laboratory, the study took place in an online setting, where one participant was told that they would be interacting with another “participant”, who in reality was a computer- simulated partner. The reason why I chose to use a fictitious partner is so that I could control the status characteristic difference in each condition. The

study conditions differed based on the partner's status in the interaction where there was 1) a lo-status partner and 2) a hi-status partner. Following the scope conditions discussed above, there should only be one differentiating status characteristic activated during these interactions. By utilizing a simulated partner, I was able to use an information sheet to match all status characteristics except for one that was intentionally manipulated based on the condition. For this study, the status characteristic that was manipulated was level of education, where having a GED represented the lo-status partner (condition 1) and having a Master's degree represented the hi-status partner (condition 2).

The study began with participants filling out an information sheet that collected several demographics such as their age, race, ethnicity, gender, highest level of education, and participant ID (which was provided to them at the start of the study by the research assistant). They were then told that they were being virtually paired with another participant, who may be participating in another lab on campus or in a lab at a local community/technical college. Participants would then receive randomized information about their partner, which included their participant ID and highest level of education. After "meeting" their partner through the information sheets, participants were told that they would be working on a collective task together with the goal of getting the highest number of responses correct.

The study utilized a contrast sensitivity task (Webster & Rashotte, 2010; Melamed & Savage, 2016; Overton, 2021), in which participants were shown two panels that contained different areas of black and white and were then asked to indicate if the top or bottom panel had more white space. In reality, there were equal amounts of black and white in each panel. After giving a response, the participant would be shown their

partner's response, which was typically the opposite of the participant's answer, and the participants were then asked if they would like to change their final answer.

After completing 12 rounds of the contrast sensitivity task, participants were asked to complete an "exchange activity" with their partner, which was structured like a traditional trust game. In this activity, participants were told that they would be randomly assigned to one of two roles; Role A was labeled as the "sender" and Role B was labeled as the "receiver". In this activity, both people would begin with 5 raffle tickets. The person in role A would have the option to send some, all, or none of their tickets over to the person in role B. Any tickets that were sent in this exchange would be tripled. The person in role B would then have the option to send some, all, or none of the tripled tickets back to the person in role A. For this study, participants were always assigned to role A, as the number of tickets they decided to send to their partner served as our main behavioral measure of trust. Before receiving the "results" of the trust game, participants were asked to complete some questionnaires that included measures of perceived competency of their partner, perceived warmth, as well as how trustworthy they perceived their partner to be.

Measures

In this experiment, status was determined by the condition that the participant was assigned to. In condition 1, the participant holds the hi-status characteristic (current Undergraduate vs. GED) and in condition 2, the participant holds the lo-status characteristic (current Undergraduate vs. Master's Degree). Competency perceptions about interaction partners were measured using the average of a 3-item questionnaire asking "how would you rate your partner" on a 7-point scale in terms of

competent/incompetent, knowledgeable/unknowledgeable, and capable/incapable (Ridgeway & Erikson, 2000). Warmth perceptions about interaction partners were measured using the average of a 6-item questionnaire asking “how would you rate your partner” on a 7-point scale in terms of warm/cold, trustworthy/untrustworthy, friendly/unfriendly, honest/dishonest, likable/unlikable, and sincere/insincere (Ridgeway & Erikson, 2000). And finally, level of trust was determined by the number of raffle tickets sent by participants in the traditional trust game. Which is a behavioral measure of trust that assumes that people with higher trust in their partner would send more tickets, as they anticipate that their partner is trustworthy and would send an appropriate amount of tickets back.

Sample

For this experiment, during the Spring 2023 semester, 192 current university undergraduate students came to participate in an in-person study at the University of South Carolina Sociology Department Research Laboratory. The proposed sample population for this study was current undergraduate students, between the ages of 18-24, attending the University of South Carolina. Students were recruited across campus through the Sociology Department Research Laboratory and added to a participant pool managed on SONA, an online participant management system. Interested and eligible students could sign up for a timeslot of their choice to participate in this study. Participants were compensated with extra credit (if applicable) and/or raffle tickets for the chance to win a \$25 Visa gift card.

Of the 192 students who came to participate in this study, the final sample size used in the analysis below was equal to 182. Five observations were dropped during the

data collection period, four due to technical issues during the experiment and one due to the participant's misunderstanding of the task involved in the study. Furthermore, five observations were dropped after the data collection period, three for falling outside of the age control of 18-24 years old and two for indicating that they had obtained a Bachelor's degree and were thus not considered to be current undergraduate students. For this analysis, 154 participants (84.6%) were female, and 143 participants (78.6%) were White.

RESULTS

For this analysis, I will examine status as an independent variable. Trust as a dependent variable. Competency perceptions as a dependent variable as well as a mediating variable. And finally, warmth perceptions as a covariate. Table 1.1 below shows basic correlations between each of these variables used in the following analysis.

Table 1.1 Main Variable Correlations

	Status	Trust	Competence	Warmth		
Status	1.0000					
Trust	0.0443				1.000	
Competence	0.1069				0.1842	1.000
Warmth	0.0835				-0.0916	0.5967

To test hypothesis 1, I ran a basic t-test to determine if competency perceptions statistically differed by condition. For this test, the independent variable was status and the dependent variable was competency perceptions, which was measured using a 3-item questionnaire of first-ordered expectations, described above (Ridgeway & Erikson, 2000). For this analysis, this 3-item scale had a cronbach alpha score of 0.8965,

demonstrating high reliability. The result of this test was statistically significant ($t=2.5144$; $Pr=0.0128$), shown below in Table 1.2. This means we reject the null hypothesis as there was a statistically significant difference of means in terms of competency perceptions by condition. This indicates that participants rated hi-status partners as more competent than lo-status partners during this interaction.

Table 1.2 Competency Perceptions of Partner by Condition

Condition	Mean	SD	95% CI
Lo-Status Partner (n=94)	5.4645	1.1085	5.2375 - 5.6916
Hi-Status Partner (n=88)	5.8598	1.0054	5.6468 - 6.0729
df = 180 $t = -2.5145$ $Pr = 0.0128^*$			

To test hypothesis 2, I ran an ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance) test to determine if levels of trust statistically differed by condition when perceptions of warmth were controlled. Levels of trust were determined by the number of raffle tickets the participant chose to send to their partner during the “exchange activity”. The distribution of tickets sent is shown in Table 1.3 below. For this analysis, the calculated mean of trust was 3.7473 tickets sent. For this test, trust was the dependent variable, status was the independent variable, and perceptions of warmth were held constant as a covariate. Warmth perceptions were measured using a 6-item questionnaire of first-ordered expectations, outlined above (Ridgeway & Erikson, 2000). For this analysis, this 6-item scale had a cronbach alpha score of 0.9035, again demonstrating high reliability. The result of this test was not statistically significant, as shown in Table 1.4 below. Here we fail to reject the null hypothesis for hypothesis 2, as there was no statistical difference in means between levels of trust extended to partners based on condition when controlling

for perceptions of warmth. This indicates that hi-status participants and lo-status participants trusted their partners to a similar degree, as they sent a similar amount of raffle tickets, regardless of their partners' different level of education.

Table 1.3 Behavioral Trust, Number of Raffle Tickets Sent

Raffle Tickets Sent	Frequency	Percent
0	3	1.65
1	4	2.20
2	29	15.39
3	42	23.08
4	26	14.29
5	78	42.86
Total	182	100.00

Table 1.4 Levels of Trust by Condition

Condition	Mean	SD	95% CI
Lo-Status Partner (n=94)	3.6915	1.3680	3.4113 - 3.9717
Hi-Status Partner (n=88)	3.8068	1.2397	3.5441 - 4.0695
df = 180 t = -0.5946 Pr = 0.5529			

Table 1.5 Levels of Trust by Condition

	Partial SS	df	MS	F	p>F
Model	2.9859	2	1.4930	0.88	0.4186
Condition	0.8382	1	0.8382	0.49	0.4842
Warmth Perceptions	2.3814	1	2.3814	1.40	0.2390
Residual	305.3877	179	1.7061		

Since I did not find a statistically significant relationship between levels of trust based on status differences, there was no need to test my third and final hypothesis. This hypothesis predicted that competency perceptions would mediate or help to explain the relationship between trust and status (predicted in H2). Of course, the results from my analysis above indicate that I cannot say that competency perceptions due to differences in status explain why levels of trust differ between groups.

DISCUSSION

From this analysis, I did not find any significant evidence to suggest that status influences levels of initial trust, or more specifically that perceptions of competency influence levels of trust towards strangers when working on a task together. However, I was able to employ an experimental design that allowed me to test how status differences between strangers influenced their interactions. Consistent with past literature and research on status characteristics, I did find support for my first hypothesis, which predicted that hi-status partners would be perceived as more competent than their lo-status counterparts and vice versa (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; Berger et al., 1998). This means that partners with a Master's degree (hi-status) were regarded as having higher levels of perceived competence in comparison to partners with a GED (lo-status). This finding is consistent with previous research as status characteristics and expectation states theory has demonstrated that hi-status DSCs are generally ranked and associated with higher levels of perceived competence (Berger, et al. 1977; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006).

This result indicates that the manipulation of status, using the highest level of education as a DSC, was sufficient to test the relationship between status and trust, which was proposed in my second hypothesis. However, I did not find support for this hypothesis in my analysis, as levels of trust did not vary significantly based on whether the participant was interacting with a hi-status or lo-status partner. The majority of participants fully trusted their partners with 78 (42.9%) sending all of their raffle tickets to their partners and trusting that their partner would act in a benevolent manner by sending a portion of the multiplied tickets back. Furthermore, 80% of participants sent over half (at least 3) of their tickets to their partners, indicating a moderate to high level of trust.

This finding could potentially be due to the incentive structure of the trust game that was used in the study. For the trust game all participants were assigned the role of the sender (i.e. the person who sent their tickets to the receiver to be multiplied). The participant was told that they and their partner would both receive 5 tickets to start with, then the sender could choose to give none, some, or all of their tickets to their partner. Any tickets sent would be tripled and the receiver would have the choice to send back none, some, or all of the multiplied tickets. In this case, because the participant was always assigned the role of the sender, they may have felt more obligated to send a large portion of their tickets over to their partner since this was the only chance to multiply them. Additionally, since this game utilized raffle tickets instead of direct monetary earnings, participants may have felt that sending tickets was less risky since they were already not guaranteed to win the raffle drawing.

Additionally, this lack of support for this hypothesis may be due to the fact that I was not able to reach a high enough power level for detecting small effects during our one semester of data collection. In my proposal for this study, I had intended to collect data from 266 participants (133 per condition). According to the Felt power charts, this would have given me a power level of 0.9 for detecting the supposed small effect that I was predicting. This analysis was based on a total of 182 participants, with 94 in condition 1 and 88 in condition 2.

However, while I did not find support for my original hypothesis, our observation that the majority of participants (80%) demonstrated moderate to high levels of trust is consistent with previous literature that indicated people tend to exhibit higher levels of initial trust towards unknown others (Pillutla, Malthra, & Murnighan, 2003; Lount et al., 2008; Kramer & Lewicki, 2010). In this experiment, participants believed that the person they were working with was a complete stranger and they had very little interaction with one another before deciding whether to trust them in the basic trust game. So contrary to the belief that trust must be built over time through continued interaction with another person, this finding suggests that levels of initial trust start off high, even after working collectively with a complete stranger.

Finally, I did not find support for my last hypothesis of this project, that predicted perceptions of competency would mediate the relationship between levels of trust and status differences. This finding is unsurprising as I did not find a statistically significant relationship between trust and status when testing hypothesis 2 above. Since levels of trust did not vary based on participant condition, competency perceptions cannot be used to explain the relationship between the two.

Implications for Future Research

While this analysis did not find any significant evidence to suggest that perceptions of competence influence levels of initial trust, I believe further studies should be conducted on a larger scale to test this relationship. As mentioned above, I was not able to collect the intended sample size per condition for this analysis, thus I might not have enough statistical power to detect small effect sizes. Furthermore, future studies should test other diffuse status characteristics, like race, gender, or age, to see if those statuses become more salient in influencing levels of initial trust. Past research has examined how characteristics like race influences levels of trust, in terms of generalized, particularized, and strategic trust (Smith, 2010). While other studies have examined gender differences that are observed in perceptions of trust and trustworthiness (Mukherjee, 2020). Since these characteristics can impact different types of trust, it is important that we consider how these other diffuse characteristics might impact this relationship between status and initial trust.

Finally, I believe that future research should continue to examine why people tend to exhibit high levels of initial trust towards complete strangers by determining what conditions are applicable. Do we see these same levels of high initial trust in organizational settings? Are levels of initial trust impacted by the type of relationship that is present during first interactions? Or in other words, are high levels of initial trust only observable when you are asked to work collectively with a stranger? What are the consequences of low initial trust towards strangers? Future research should focus on advancing our understanding of initial trust and the conditions in which we tend to have

high levels of initial trust, as this trust is necessary during our social interactions with others.

CONCLUSION

As social beings, trust is always going to be a fundamental element of our relationships with one another. It is crucial that we continue to examine these aspects of trust to determine not only how it is formed but also how it can impact our relationships over time. This study did not find that differences in status characteristics, in terms of highest level of education, between complete strangers impacted levels of trust given to said stranger, at least in an online setting when working on a collective task. While we did not find support for this main effect, we did find that participants tended to report moderate to high levels of trust towards their unknown partner. Future research should examine under what conditions high levels of initial trust form as well as how different status characteristics can influence this relationship. Given that trust is crucial to our social interactions with others, it is vital that we continue examining trust experimentally.

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