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# Trust Differences Between Men and Women in Superior-Subordinate Relationships

Dow Scott

*Trust perceptions of male and female respondents toward on-site supervisors, area supervisors, and top management were investigated in a large state agency. Although trust differences between men and women toward management were not found, respondents reporting to someone of the same gender had significantly higher trust in their superior than did men or women reporting to a superior of the opposite sex. Perceptions of trust were also found to be significantly related to the respondent's position level in the organization.*

During the last fifteen years, women have been entering the management ranks in increasing numbers (Employment and Training Report of the President, 1979). However, as any protected group starts to enter jobs from which it was formerly excluded, concerns are expressed about whether they can satisfactorily perform the work and interact successfully with peers, subordinates, and superiors. Although one would suspect that gender is an

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important aspect of superior-subordinate relationships, research is quite limited because there are still relatively few women managers. As a result, researchers have been forced to survey women across a number of organizations, or more frequently to use female students as subjects. The organization selected for this study has a relatively large number of women in managerial and professional positions, which offers an opportunity to examine superior-subordinate relationships where men and women are represented at all levels in the organization.

Trust was chosen as the dependent variable because it has been shown to have an important influence on interpersonal relationships within organizations. For example, trust has been found to be a necessary element for open, accurate communications (Mellinger, 1956); to influence the effectiveness of group problem-solving and decision-making (Zand, 1972; Gamson, 1968); to effect people's attitudes and feelings about the organization and their jobs (Driscoll, 1978); to determine the methods management will use to control employee behavior (Gibb, 1965); and to be causally linked to the successful implementation of management by objectives programs (Hollmann, 1976; Scott, 1980).

Although there are variations in the definitions of trust, Griffin's (1967) definition is succinct and seems to capture the essence of this concept.

It is the reliance upon the characteristics of an object, or the occurrence of an event, or the behavior of a person in order to achieve a desired but uncertain objective in a risky situation. (p. 105)

Trust, then, can be characterized as a positive force from which cooperation is derived, whereas mistrust is characterized as the unwillingness of individuals to take cooperative action that increases their vulnerability.

Individuals who are mistrustful are reluctant to share their opinions, ideas, and efforts because of perceived possible negative outcomes (Gibb, 1965).

### **TRUST DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN**

Research on the influence of gender on trust is limited and focuses primarily on the trust respondents have in unspecified authority figures. For example, Wrightsman (1974) used the Philosophies of Human Nature Questionnaire (PHN) to collect trust data from each freshman class at Peabody College over an eight-year period. Although he found that women consistently indicated more trust in authority figures than did men, those differences were significant in only four of the eight years. Wrightsman (1974) postulated the following reasons for these findings: (1) Women are more removed and protected than are men from many of the unpleasant aspects of human nature; (2) the socialization process trains women to assume the best or to think well of people; and (3) girls do not participate as frequently as do boys in physically aggressive competitive activities. However, Rotter (1971) found no such differences between men and women when he administered the Interpersonal Trust Scale (ITS) to 248 male and 229 female college students. Moreover, Sawyer, Davis, Pasework, and Fitzgerald (1973), using the same scale (ITS), also were unable to find significant trust differences between 474 male and 485 female high school students. These inconsistent findings are especially difficult to resolve because both scales are quite similar in content and construction (Stack, 1978). As a result, we can only tentatively hypothesize that women will indicate higher levels of trust than men toward their superiors.



Another way of examining the effect of gender on trust is to ask: Will subordinates trust women superiors as much as they will trust men? Although no empirical research has addressed this question directly, numerous studies have examined attitudes and behaviors attributed to men and women in managerial positions. Mirides and Cole (1980) and Broverman et al. (1972) noted the pervasiveness of a negative stereotype for women wishing to enter such positions. This stereotype includes the following: (1) Women work only for money; (2) women are not committed to work; (3) women are not predisposed emotionally or intellectually for jobs that traditionally have been occupied by men; and (4) women are unable to coordinate their career goals with family goals. Rosen and Jerdee (1978) found that male managers rated women lower than men on positive attitudes toward work, work aptitude, skills, knowledge, motivation, job interest, temperament, and work habits. Furthermore, men were thought to have better leadership and decision-making skills, to be more dependable and reliable, and to have the skills and experiences that make them more employable and promotable than women.

Powell and Butterfields (1979) and Schein (1973, 1975) suggest that managerial positions are also "sex-typed" in terms of those characteristics most often associated with men. Bass, Krusell, and Alexander (1971) surveyed 174 men in managerial and staff positions concerning their attitudes toward women in managerial positions. The respondents felt that women would make poor supervisors, not because they were less capable but because societal norms do not sanction the placement of women in dominant positions. These managers indicated not only that they would be uncomfortable with a woman supervisor but other men and women would prefer having male supervisors. It is not surprising that Massengill

and Marco (1979) found that men were judged to perform better than women for management positions even when both possessed the same objective qualifications. Furthermore, men in managerial positions are rated more highly than women (Bass et al., 1971, Rosen & Jerdee, 1978). Because of this negative attitude toward women in management, it is hypothesized (2) that subordinates will indicate higher levels of trust for male superiors than for female superiors.

Finally, studies suggest that gender of the supervisor and subordinate will interact (Hypothesis 3). Munson (1979) examined the interaction between satisfaction with supervision and the possible sex combinations in the supervisor-subordinate reporting relationship. He found no support for the belief that women were regarded less highly than men in managerial positions. Munson's research suggested that males were not less satisfied or more threatened by female supervisors. In fact, the lowest supervisors' rating occurred in the male superior-female subordinate reporting relationships. He noted that the majority of the unfavorable ratings toward women supervisors were from men who had never been supervised by women.

Mai-Dalton and Sullivan (1981) also found an interaction between the gender of person assigning a job (the participant) and the gender of the person being assigned. Women were more likely to assign women to challenging tasks, and men were more likely to assign men for the same challenging job. Their findings indicated that this choice was made because participants believed there would be less conflict with someone of their own sex. Furthermore, men seemed more likely to justify their prejudices on the basis of role stereotyping. As noted by these authors, Rosen and Jerdee (1974) also found that men were preferred for challenging jobs, as would be predicted for their all-male sample.



Larwood and Blackmore (1978) found further support for an interaction effect. When college students were asked to find leaders for a research study, women were more likely to identify women for such positions and men were more likely to identify men. Their explanation for the bias in favor of aiding and promoting members of one's own set was because people generally have more in common with someone of the same sex as opposed to someone of the opposite sex.

In summary it is hypothesized that (1) women will indicate higher levels of trust toward their superiors than will men; (2) subordinates will indicate higher levels of trust for male superiors than for female superiors; and (3) an interaction will occur where a subordinate will express more trust in a superior of the same sex than a superior of the opposite sex.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

This research was conducted in a state cooperative extension service in the Midwest. The agency is headquartered at a land-grant university and has offices in each county throughout the state. This is a service organization that provides training programs and solves specific problems in areas of agriculture, home economics, youth, and community development. The subjects were program agents and county extension directors. The extension service in this state is structured such that a dual reporting relationship exists. At each county location, one agent is assigned as the county extension director (CED). The CED in addition to carrying out his or her

technical duties as an agent, provides office supervision for other agents, clerical employees, and his or her own assistants. All program agents, including the CED, also report to a regional supervisor. The regional supervisor provides technical support and supervision for their designated region. The regional supervisor is the superior who has the authority to make staffing and salary decisions at both regional and county levels. However, the regional supervisor may delegate this authority to the CED at the county level depending on the size of the county operation and the CED's capabilities. A bachelor's degree is required for these jobs; however, some agents and the CEDs have or are working toward master's degrees, and a few hold doctorates in their specialty area.

Even though women are represented in larger numbers in managerial and professional positions than in most organizations, they are not equally represented at all levels. The Cooperative Extension Service employs a total of 503 persons in managerial and professional levels, and 153 (30%) of these are women. Women represent 22% of the staff at both top management (university) and regional supervisor level. However, the numbers of women in CED positions (11%) have lagged behind the advancements women have made at other levels. Although it may seem surprising that women are least well represented at the lower level of management (CED), this probably is due to the influence of local government on the selection of the CED. Because the CED is the interface with local county government and these decisions may involve local politics, top management has had some difficulties in putting women into these county positions.

Questionnaires were distributed to all program agents (N = 280) employed by the extension service. Of the 219



questionnaires returned by mail, 204 responses or 73% of the total population provided usable questionnaires. In terms of the "trust in CED" analysis, only 155 questionnaires (66%) were usable, as some program agents were, in fact, the CED, thus making it inappropriate for them to complete the CED trust scale on themselves.

The sample had the following characteristics: 133 program agents were male and 86 were female; the average age of the program agents was 39, which did not differ significantly by sex; and only 14 program agents were members of a racial minority group.

### **Measures and Analysis**

In this study, what could be termed self-report situational measures of trust were used. Typically, trust has been measured either by the trusting behaviors exhibited or by self-report questionnaires. The latter approach was chosen because of the difficulties in obtaining behavioral measures in the field. The other basic distinction that can be made is in the focus of the measure. Rotter (Interpersonal Trust Scale) and Wrightsman (Philosophies of Human Nature Scale) measure trust in terms of the individual's feelings of trust toward significant but unspecified others; that is, teachers, parents, politicians, the press, and so on. These items are added to produce what could be termed a generalized measure of trust. The other approach focuses on the situation in which trust is of interest. For example, if employee trust in management is of interest, then the trust items request the respondent to answer questions about his or her perceived trust in management. The situational trust approach was chosen because it has been found to be a stronger predictor of behavior than the generalized approach (Schlenker, Helm, & Tedeschi, 1973).

The respondent's perception of trust toward his or her on-site superior (CED), program area superior (Regional Supervisor), and top management (extension management located at the state university) was the measure chosen for this study. Because previously developed scales did not provide trust measures for this type of employment relationship, trust scales were specifically designed for the study, as shown in Table 1. However, other trust scales were examined so the items could be framed in the conventional terms used to measure trust (Likert, 1967; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974; Friedlander, 1970; Griffin, 1967).

Based on these other trust scales and a definition of trust, a large number of items were constructed. This bank of items was examined by four experts in the social sciences and was reduced to 29 items, which were then tested in a pilot study. Based on the pilot study, the three scales were reduced to a total of 13 items, as shown in Table 1. These scales were administered three times in another research location; the results from this study are reported in Scott (1980). In this previous study, the measures were shown to be reliable over time. As would be predicted from the literature, the trust in superior and trust in management scales were found to have a positive significant ( $p < .001$ ) relationship to participation in decision-making (Rosen & Jerdee, 1977; Zand, 1972; Gamson, 1968), to the success of a management by objectives program (Patten, 1972; Hollmann, 1976; Scott, 1980), and to job satisfaction (Driscoll, 1978). This indicates that these scales are, indeed, valid measures of trust.

The general linear models (GLM) procedure from the *Statistical Analysis System User's Guide* (1979) was used to analyze the data. Although GLM is a regression procedure, it handles classification variables as well as continuous variables.

**TABLE 1**  
**Factor Analysis Results of Trust Measures (varimax rotation)**

	FACTOR I	FACTOR II	FACTOR III	$\lambda^2$
<b>CEO Trust</b>				
1. I feel free to discuss work problems with my immediate supervisor without fear of having it used against me later.	.912	.034	-.038	.835
2. I have complete trust that my immediate supervisor will treat me fairly.	.937	.072	.003	.884
3. If I make a mistake my supervisor is willing to "forgive and forget."	.893	.095	.053	.809
4. My supervisor is friendly and approachable.	.893	-.023	.110	.810
5. I can count on my immediate supervisor for help if I have difficulties with my job.	.861	.137	.089	.768
<b>Regional Supervisor Trust</b>				
6. In most cases, my regional supervisor is concerned about my welfare.	.176	.841	.204	.779
7. It is best not to confide in my regional supervisor because the information you share is likely to be used against you.	-.143	.747	.056	.582
8. All things considered, I have trust that my regional supervisor will treat me fairly.	.185	.882	.150	.834
9. I can rely on my regional supervisor to help me if I have difficulties getting my job done.	.094	.857	.088	.751
<b>Management Trust</b>				
10. Management has little regard for the well being of people who work for this organization.	.125	.212	.793	.690
11. At Cooperative Extension management <u>cannot</u> be trusted.	.083	.293	.801	.735
12. When management must make decisions which seem to be against the best interests of the employee, I believe that management's decisions are justified by other considerations.	.012	-.091	.554	.315
13. Management seldom follows through with what they say they are going to do.	-.014	.166	.811	.686
Eigenvalue	4.7	3.1	1.7	
Variance Explained	41.7	29.8	23.3	



**TABLE 2**  
**Trust-Measures Intercorrelations<sup>a</sup>**

	1	2	3
1. CED Trust	(.968)		
2. Regional Supervisor	.163	(.834)	
3. Management Trust	.145	.385	(.847)

<sup>a</sup> Coefficient alpha values are in parentheses.

## RESULTS

The questionnaire items designed to measure trust in CED, trust in regional supervision, and trust in management are shown in Table 1. The factor analysis results (orthogonal rotation: varimax), which also appear in Table 1, are consistent with theoretical assignment of items to scales. As the factor-analytic results indicate, three factors emerged with an eigenvalue of greater than 1.00 and explained 95% of the variance. As shown in Table 2, the coefficient alphas are greater than .83, and the interscale correlations were substantially less than the alphas, which according to Nunnally (1978) indicates discriminant validity.

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that women would express higher levels of trust than men, was not supported. First, as shown in Table 3, no significant differences in trust between men and women respondents were found toward CEDs ( $F = 1.96$ ,  $p = .164$ ), regional supervisors ( $F = 3.76$ ,  $p = .054$ ), and management ( $F = 1.33$ ,  $p = .250$ ). Although trust in regional supervisors

**TABLE 3**  
**Relationship of Trust to Gender and Position Level**

VARIABLE	DF	F-STAT	SIGNI- FICANCE	R <sup>2</sup>
<u>CED TRUST</u>	171	5.16	.002	.084
CED Sex	1	1.04	.310	
Respondent Sex	1	1.96	.164	
CED Sex * Respondent Sex	1	.82	.367	
<u>REG. SUPV. TRUST</u>	177	5.37	.001	.110
Reg. Supv. Sex	1	.10	.753	
Respondent Sex	1	3.76	.054	
Position Level	1	5.94	.016	
Reg. Supv. Sex * Respondent Sex	1	12.35	.001	
<u>MGT. TRUST</u>	189	2.57	.079	.027
Respondent Sex	1	1.33	.250	
Position Level	1	5.01	.026	

was close to being significant, the mean scores indicate that men have higher levels of trust than do women, which is in the opposite direction of the predicted relationship ( $\bar{x} = 4.31$ ,  $sd = .88$  and  $\bar{x} = 3.73$ ,  $sd = .99$ , respectively). When CED sex and the interaction term are taken from the model reported in Table 3, men are found to have significantly higher levels of trust ( $F = 27.03$ ,  $p = .001$ ), which is again the opposite direction predicted. Because the CED position is held predominantly by men, the trust differences between male and female respondents may be influenced by the gender of CED, as will be discussed.

Hypothesis 2, which predicted that respondents would trust male superiors more than female superiors, clearly

was not supported. As indicated in Table 3, CED or regional supervisor gender did not have a significant influence ( $F = 1.04$ ,  $p = .310$  and  $F = .10$ ,  $p = .753$ , respectively). This hypothesis could not be tested with the management trust measure because top management is composed of both men and women.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted an interaction between the gender of the respondent and superior, was supported. The interaction between regional supervisor's gender and the respondents' gender reported in Table 3 were significant ( $F = 12.35$ ,  $p = .001$ ). This indicates that trust levels for the regional supervisor were significantly higher where respondents reported to someone of the same sex rather than someone of the opposite sex. The mean scores (trust in regional supervisor) for men reporting to men ( $\bar{x} = 3.82$ ,  $sd = .87$ ) and women reporting to women ( $\bar{x} = 4.06$ ,  $sd = .88$ ) were not significantly different. While mean scores for women reporting to men ( $\bar{x} = 3.42$ ,  $sd = .80$ ) and men reporting to women ( $\bar{x} = 3.24$ ,  $sd = .98$ ) were also not significantly different, the difference was significantly higher when respondents reported to someone of the same sex as opposed to someone of the opposite sex.

The findings of trust in regional supervisor are consistent with the trust respondents expressed for the CED. As one would expect, women indicate lower levels of trust than do men toward CEDs who are predominantly male. The interaction effect could not be tested for trust in management because top management is composed of both men and women.

The position level of the respondents (used as a moderating variable) was also found to significantly influence trust in regional supervisor ( $F = 5.94$ ,  $p = .016$ ) and trust in management ( $F = 5.23$ ,  $p = .023$ ). In both cases, CEDs indicated significantly higher levels of trust than did agents. (The mean scores of trust in regional supervisors



was  $\bar{x} = 3.98$  for CEDs and  $\bar{x} = 3.52$  for agents. The mean scores of trust in management was  $\bar{x} = 3.78$  for CEDs and  $\bar{x} = 3.52$  for agents.) Because the respondents in this study came from only two position levels—agent or CED—the influence of position level could not be determined for CED trust.

### DISCUSSION

The lack of support for the Hypothesis 1, that women trust superiors or top management more than do men, is consistent with the empirical findings obtained when trust is measured with Rotter's Interpersonal Trust Scale (Rotter, 1971; Sawyer et al., 1973). Although Wrightsman (1974) found trust differences utilizing the Philosophy of Human Nature Questionnaire, these differences were significant in only four of the eight years in which data were collected. In fact, this analysis lends some support to the notion that men are more trusting than women.

The results also did not support the hypothesis that subordinates will trust male superiors more than female superiors. This finding, on the surface, would seem contrary to the negative attitudes that are reportedly held toward women managers (Rosen & Jerdee, 1978; Schein, 1973, 1975; Bass et al., 1971) One would suspect that if women were judged to be less capable managers than men, subordinates would have less trust in their abilities to manage.

However, when the significant interaction effect between the sex of the subordinate and the superior is considered, the findings of this study appear more consistent with the research on attitudes toward women managers. First, when one examines the data sources of these studies, the information collected from actual managers

comes primarily from men. Secondly, when Terborg et al. (1977) examined attitudes held by both sexes, women had significantly more favorable attitudes toward women as managers than did men. Furthermore, they found that more educated women have an even more positive view of female managers. As noted earlier, the respondents (program agents) are a highly educated group.

An explanation for the differences in attitudes between men and women toward women managers may be due to the large number "women in management" programs and articles that had been published since the mid-1960s. Most of these materials are designed not only to teach women the necessary skills for managerial roles but also to raise their aspiration for managerial positions and build confidence in their abilities to handle these positions. Because these materials are primarily directed toward women and because women may be more sensitive to the message that they can indeed perform managerial work, it would not be surprising that women have developed a more positive attitude toward women managers than have men.

Another explanation of the interaction effect of gender may be caused by basic attitudinal and behavioral differences between the sexes. By definition, trust is a perception a person has about the predictability and intentions of others. Differences in interests, behaviors, and the sexual mystique between men and women could certainly foster the belief that one has a greater understanding of a person of the same sex than a person of the opposite sex. Furthermore, attitudinal differences at work may be influenced by the relationships that people have in their personal lives. It may be easier to separate sexual-emotional feelings in male-male and female-female reporting relationships than in mixed reporting relationships. This explanation is consistent with Larwood and Blackmore's (1978) notion that persons of the



same sex will have more in common than persons of the opposite sex. As a result, people will respond in a more positive manner to someone of the same sex than to someone of the opposite sex.

Several implications can be drawn from this research. First, this research indicates that the relationship of gender and trust is not as straightforward as previous researchers believed. More specifically, trust levels may be adversely affected where men and women report to superiors of the opposite sex. Thus this research suggests a similarity rather than a difference between men and women because both groups are more willing to trust someone of the same sex than someone of the opposite sex. Second, position level seems to have an important relationship on trust, and additional research needs to be done to determine if it influences trust. Finally, future attitudinal research should consider the influence of the gender of the superior on interaction between superiors and subordinates rather than just considering the gender of the respondent.

This research suggests that moving women into supervisory and managerial jobs that in the past have been typically a male domain will have an adverse impact on trust. Because trust is an essential element of a good interpersonal relationship between superiors and subordinates, managers should be made aware of the potential problems inherent in this situation. Although one strategy for dealing with this potential problem is a policy of having persons of the same sex report to one another, this would have adverse ethical and legal ramifications. A more practical solution would be to develop training programs to increase trust between men and women (e.g., teambuilding, sensitivity training, confrontation groups). In any event, when organizational conditions are such that men and women are reporting to persons of the opposite sex, this fact should not be



ignored as might be attempted by some companies trying to remain "nonsexist."

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