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REVISITING THE ROLE OF TRUST IN COOPERATION: PROFESSIONAL CULTURES

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents our reflection on the topic of professional cultures and trust emerging from several research projects conducted in IT firms in Poland and in the United States over the years 2002-2007 (for some accounts see: Jemielniak, 2007; Latusek, 2007; Latusek & Jemielniak, 2007).

Even though our research originates from management and organization studies field, clearly management nowadays is deeply rooted in culture and, according to some scholars, relies mostly on managing and coordinating different organizational and occupational subcultures (Koźmiński, Jemielniak, & Latusek, 2009).

These are particularly visible in knowledge-intensive organizations, where the melting pot of different professional and organizational cultures is strikingly visible: culture clashes between particular occupational groups in IT business are enormous (Kawasaki, 1990), while the need for trust is particularly high. This, combined with the fact that most IT projects exceed budget, schedule or both (Brooks, 1975/1995; Genuchten, 1991) makes software companies a field most suitable for studies of trust in professional cultures.

METHODOLOGY

Altogether, we have conducted four long-term field studies within two independent research projects run independently by the co-authors. Two of them were conducted in Poland, and two in the United States (in Silicon Valley/Bay Area and Route 128 area). Both of these projects were grounded in interpretative paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992).

In line with this, from a methodological point of view, they were using qualitative methods, mainly ethnography (Rosen, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988);

We consider this approach highly valuable for the current debate on the issues of trust because it addresses the repeatedly voiced need for local, interpretative studies of trust (Kramer, 1996; Möllering, 2006; Rus & Iglic, 2005; Wicks, et al., 1999), as well as for studying trust in less stable, underexplored cultural contexts (Child & Möllering, 2003; Ferrin, 2007; Hagen and Choe, 1998; Tillmar & Lindkvist, 2007). This approach complements mainstream research in that it aims to provide more insightful clues about the experience of trust, namely, how it is seen by organizational actors (Ferrin, 2007; Möllering, 2006). It may also facilitate an understanding where quantitative methods are not sufficient; it is best suited for explorative purposes – being particularly valuable when delving into hidden, or little-known, aspects of well-analyzed phenomena (Kostera, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In line with this, we adopt this approach to take a fresh look at the role of trust in cooperation between representatives of distinct professional cultures.

Although the role of trust in cooperation has been studied previously from many different angles and despite a large literature on its origins, sources, mechanisms, consequences and performance effects, studies that could supply rich, contextual data and that reconstruct the dynamics of relationships are relatively scarce (Möllering, 2006). In our studies, instead, we responded to the call for "bringing context back to the research" (Bijlsma-Frakema and Costa, 2005) and study collaboration from the point of view of the organizational actors in the field (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In our interpretation we build on their accounts of reality to whether trust is truly vital to cooperation. Moreover, we apply their arguments to explain how participants in professional relationships approach and perceive collaborative acts and how we could best describe the nature of their behavior towards each other. Ethnographies are well suited for such endeavors because they provide a picture of social phenomena in their rich context, without abstraction, taking into account unique backgrounds and reflecting the texture of human relationships (Kostera, 2007). They rely on a naturalistic approach to processes and offer the opportunity to study the social world in its natural context, dynamics and complexity, filling in the gaps in our understanding that cannot be bridged by positivist methodologies. We therefore believe that knowledge gained in this way should be socially instructive for the group of actors in the field (practitioners) and an inspiration for students of trust in academia, too.

CONTEHXT AND FIELD

Hitherto, "empirical studies of trust and cooperation are often performed on societies or formal organizations, where a stable and reliable macro sys-

tem of governance and hierarchy prevails" (Tillmar and Landkvist, 2007: 344). Moreover, most studies on trust are conducted in the US and Western Europe, where different institutional arrangements and cultural assumptions may hold when compared with other countries (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Child & Möllering, 2003). This study involves Poland – still a country in transition. Whereas the precise moment of transformation belongs to the distant past, a feeling of change still pervades almost every aspect of social life in Poland – be it politics, the economy or culture (Koźmiński & Sztompka, 2004; Staniszkis, 2001; Sztompka, 1996). Consequently, Poland, as a transitional culture, may constitute a perfect research site, or, as Sztompka (1999: xi) puts it, "a kind of useful laboratory for applying and testing viability of theoretical concepts and models".

For several reasons, we focus on software development. First, the Polish software industry has been flourishing since the global stagnation on high-tech markets at the turn of the century. Of the three segments that make up the IT industry (hardware, software, services) the software sector has been growing the most rapidly (IDC, 2005). This quick development was caused by an increasing demand of the telecom sector, logistic companies, foreign investments and public institutions. It is also prompted by the effects of the European Union (EU) accession (transfer of significant funds supporting IT modernization for both business and public institutions). The market is still considered under saturated in almost all segments, especially as more sophisticated software solutions and services are concerned, but particular growth potential is seen in the SME (small and medium enterprise) sector, which now accounts for one-eighth the value of the Polish IT market and which needs to double in order to reach the average share in the Western European countries. Also, Polish programmers are considered to be among the top coders in the world consistently over the last number of years, acclaimed in many programming competitions, such as Top Coder, Google Code Jam, or ACM International Collegiate Programming Contest.

Second, control and coordination problems between professional cultures in software development are particularly acute – knowledge workers in IT business have reached the stage where they can openly challenge the managerial dominance (Raelin, 1986), and thus this organizational field is most interesting for the study.

Third, in the context of the IT industry, the potential role of trust becomes even more pronounced when we consider the high cost and long duration of IT projects. Since 80% of IT projects exceed time or budget limitations set in the beginning (Jemielniak, 2009), the very setting of the social transaction makes it highly prone to distrust and uncertainty.

In total, 8 organizations participated in the research (4 in Poland, 4 in the United States). Our main techniques for collecting data were: interviews, observations, and document analysis. To observe the word-count limit for this

paper we had to constrain the descriptions of methodology to the minimum, it is available in our other works based on the same projects (Hunter, Jemielniak, & Postuła, 2010; Jemielniak, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Latusek, 2007, 2008; Latusek & Jemielniak, 2007, 2008).

For this paper we looked at the collected material and compared the accounts we gathered independently from the perspective of professional cultures and trust. The results fall into three main themes: definition of trust, role of trust, alternative mechanisms securing cooperation, and knowledge-workers' professional culture.

RESULTS

Definition of trust

The concept of trust seen in the eyes of our interviewees seems to be dramatically different from what we see in mainstream management discourse. Many of the interviewees mentioned that trust was not a significant factor in the relationships in which they were engaged because it simply did not resonate in the context of professional relationships.

> Keith: Trust just does not sound well here, I'm not comfortable with that (…) It simply doesn't happen in these kinds of relations.

Our interviewees even suggested that it is necessary to keep private, trustful relationships separate from professional, business relationships because failing to keep them separate may cause serious problems.

> Dorothy: You see, it's better not to be in close contacts or make friends… We've had here cases when people wanted to abuse good personal relationships to finagle something… Well, you may have fun with people, but you must constantly mind the boundaries, otherwise it always drives you into trouble. A man is only a man, and then one has to maneuver, you can't make commitments, but your friends may demand you to do so.

The accounts of trust that we have gathered in the course of our research were marked by this sharp division mentioned in the quote above, marking a difference between private and professional spheres of life. This may be seen in almost every single conversation we had – it was perfectly fine and consistent for the interviewees to first talk about trust as extremely important and indispensable in relationships, and then declare that in some kind of relationships, most notably in business context, trusting others would be an evidence of naivety. However, this inconsistency in field accounts is not surprising when we take into account existing empirical research on related phenomena (e.g., Huemer, 1998, and Möllering, 2006). This finding confirms quite common intuition that the experience of trust is rich and multifaceted

(Lewicki et al., 1998). Recent commentaries (Keyton, 2008) indicate that this apparent discrepancy in field accounts constitutes one of the most promising areas for further development of trust research. Whereas existing quantitative studies supply rich evidence about the importance of trust in either private or public dimensions of human life, there are virtually no studies that talk about the connection between them. Yet, as our findings also suggest, the understanding of trust may vary in the very same relationship; therefore, trust might well be "indispensable" and "unattainable" at the same time.

From a conceptual point of view, the understanding of trust presented by practitioners seems to resonate with the stream of research that is less dominant in literature of management and organization theory, namely the so-called 'leap of faith' perspective (Moellering, 2006). This conception of trust basically excludes calculus-based trust, or trust deriving from information-based rational decision-making (Williamson, 1993), because it presumes that "trust can be discussed meaningfully only when it is *not possible* for the actors either to exclude the risk of exploitation or to calculate it probabilistically" (Beckert, 2006: 6, italics added). This implies that this kind of trust happens only in circumstances involving radical uncertainty (Knight, 1921), risk and suspension in terms of a leap of faith, with actors believing in something without, or in spite of, empirical evidence (Möllering, 2006). As our research suggests, it is virtually impossible for actors in the field to even imagine this kind of trust happening in professional contexts.

ROLE OF TRUST

Furthermore, instead of confirming the significance of trust for collaboration, our interviewees acknowledged that distrust often pervaded the relationships in which they were involved (for illustrations see, for example, Jemielniak and Latusek 2007; Latusek 2006). During the interviews, the interviewees openly declared their suspicion of their partners, the existence of hostility and the necessity to take protective measures against potential partners. They offered explanations as to why trust was not crucial or vital to the relationships in their professional environment.

These explanation are supported by a growing body of research on the limits of trust (see e.g. Cook, et al., 2005; Williamson, 1993). In this context, our results may serve as a vehicle to confront the general presumption that trust enhances performance and that it serves as a precondition for cooperation (see also Cook, 2008), as it is promulgated in mainstream research in management and organization. Existing inquiries into issues of collaboration and the role of trust generally tend to stress its positive impact on relational quality (Ariño, De la Torre & Ring, 2001; Lusch and Brown, 1996), cooperative behavior (Ferrin, Bligh & Kohles, 2005), reciprocity (Serva, Fuller & Mayer, 2005),

the sharing of information, knowledge and perspectives (Chowdhury, 2005; Gulati, Khanna & Nohria, 1994; March & Olsen, 1975), and conflict resolution (Das & Teng, 2000; Koeszegi, 2004). Trust is sometimes seen as "indispensable in social relationships" (Lewis & Weigert, 1985: 968) and "vital for the maintenance of cooperation in society" (Zucker, 1986: 56). In other cases, it is portrayed as a sort of "magic formula" comprising an ever efficient resource that could cure almost every problem of contemporary organizations (Möllering, 2006). Gradually, however, researchers acknowledge that trust can be detrimental to collaboration as well (e.g., Anderson & Jap, 2005; Dasgupta, 1988; Hoetker, 2005; Langfred, 2004; Mesquita, 2007; Wicks, Berman & Jones 1999; Zeng & Chen, 2003). Moreover, they recognize that trust may be less crucial to cooperation than many of us have been led to believe (e.g. Cook, Hardin & Levi, 2005; Hardin, 2004; Williamson, 1993).

ALTERNATIVE MECHANISMS SECURING COOPERATION

Thirdly, our results offer preliminary insights into how actors collaborate with their counterparts in other organizations when trust is absent or when distrust prevails. As we have already indicated elsewhere (Latusek and Jemielniak 2008), successful cooperation in the cases we have analyzed is not as much about trust, but rather, borrowing the term from Giddens (1994), about "*shared understanding*". This means that balance in the relationship is attained thanks to no expectations being violated. Since both parties share the mistrustful attitude, they know what to expect from each other and consequently do not feel disappointed.

The question is then about how, in the conditions of mistrust, can cooperation happen? In the light of our results it seems that theories of professional cultures may offer us some interesting intuitions about possible answers. All professional groups involved in software development projects (namely: software engineers, managers, clients) realize that they are indispensable to complete projects successfully. Therefore, despite of some disrespect and patronizing attitude towards each other, they are able to cooperate over long periods of time. Furthermore, unique competences of each of professional groups provide a secure ground for collaboration since all of them have some kind of power (for discussion see Latusek and Jemielniak 2008).

It is worth noting, however, that even when the awareness of mistrustful attitudes towards each other, partners do not invest into trust-building initiatives. They rather impose their own perception of organizational reality on others instead of putting efforts into understanding the other one. Obviously, this calls for research on the extent and means by which actors create facades of trustworthiness or fictions of trust, in the socially constructed network of meanings (Beckert, 2005; see also Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and the means

by which others discover them and use this knowledge in the relationship. It also points out the need to distinguish between substantial and superficial action when examining research on cooperation processes.

PROFESSIONAL CULTURES

Traditionally, the professions have been defined by the stages of occupational development and were perceived rather idealistically, as formed to serve the society (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Wilensky, 1964). Later on the sociological literature evolved to take into account the fact that professionalization is also (if not mainly) the result of power struggle (Abbott, 1988; Brante, 1988), in which some occupations are successful to usurp and reserve some fields of expertise for themselves.

In this knowledge-based occupations are particularly effective. The more a given professional community is able to persuade the society that they and only they are legitimized to express authoritative opinions on some topics, the more it is "natural" that other occupations do not possess the sufficient qualifications. Thus knowledge becomes the means of power (Foucault, 1982). This has been the case of many occupations. For example doctors successfully won the battle over legitimization with the healers, accountants with the financiers (even though it was a pyrrhic victory), and lawyers with non-associated legal advisors. Consequently, the professions limit the access to their community, by raising the bar in terms of formal education, the need for apprenticeship, etc.

However, in the case of many contemporary knowledge workers, and especially software engineers, things worked out quite differently. Even though they clearly have a very high status and already are challenging many of the managerial culture assumptions (Kraft, 1977; Negroponte, 1996; Sweet & Meiksins, 2008), they remain a very open, egalitarian and to some extent even anarchistic occupation (Case & Piñeiro, 2006; Jemielniak, 2008b; Kawasaki, 1990). Their occupational culture is very distinctive and clearly opposing the traditional organizational culture (Barley & Kunda, 2004).

In relations between software engineers trust, according to our findings, seems to be rooted in professional status, much more than the formal position, or established through regular socializing.

WHERE CAN THE DISCREPANCY WITH MAINSTREAM RESEARCH COME FROM?

Our main finding that trust may be less crucial in cooperation between professional groups than frequently claimed in the literature may stem from a broad range of delusions described by Rosenzweig (2007).

Starting with the halo effect, we contend that many studies on trust claim that trust drives performance, although these attributions may simply be based on prior performance. In this regard, respondents of surveys have to rate themselves on trust scales when they already know something about the outcome. Once they believe the outcome is positive, they tend to make positive attributions regarding the trust items. When performance is negative, they tend to make negative attributions because this allows them to "create and maintain a coherent and consistent picture, to reduce cognitive dissonance" and to "make attributions based on cues that [they] think are reliable" or salient and seemingly objective (Rosenzweig, 2007: 50, 52). To have any validity, studies on trust should "rely on measures that are *independent* of performance" and that involve "actions or policies or behaviors that are not shaped by perceptions of performance" (Rosenzweig, 2007: 68, 72). In conclusion, findings on the significance of trust in existing studies are probably overstated because most trust measures are highly correlated to performance measures and most studies consist of case studies and cross-sectional studies in which the level of trust and performance were assessed at the same time.

A second factor that may have led to the overstatement of the significance of trust involves the delusion of correlation and causality. In this case, authors infer causality even though the results of their analyses represent associations or correlations. Although several authors investigating the performance effects of trust note that interrelationships "between trust and cooperation, trust and communication, and trust and performance [can] be reciprocal" (Seppänen et al. 2005: 256), most of them depict performance as the dependent variable, and only a few of them attempt to disentangle the direction of causality. In this respect, a positive coefficient for the relationship between trust and performance in a regression analysis may only mean that performance affects trust just as much as trust affects performance.

A third factor presumably causing an overstatement of the findings on the significance of trust concerns the use of a limited number of factors – including trust – to explain performance. When more predictors are included, particularly in case these were correlated with trust measures, the effects of trust diminish. What would happen with the results of studies on the performance effects of trust, for example, when we add 'the extent of interest-alignment' as an independent variable? Most of would probably expect its relationship with performance to become weaker.

Fourth, most studies on trust, and particularly those on trust in inter-organizational relationships, are prone to selection biases because only high-performing relationships are included in the research samples for the reason that most relationships in which trust is low do not extend beyond the partner selection stage and the majority of the less successful relationships probably

terminate before research can be conducted so they are not included in the databases that are the basis of survey studies. These effects are reinforced by the reluctance of most people to talk voluntarily about failures.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research shows that trust is more a buzzword than a truly useful explanatory key in terms of organizational performance, especially in the case of knowledge-intensive companies. The cultural enactment of trust and the social construct of the need for it are deeply rooted in managerial and sociological literature, but the case of software development proves that even in highly risky environment and in high distrust, as well as low trust, projects can be successfully developed and processed.

It seems that occupational culture standards (created independently from organizational and managerial expectations), as well as the project structure, proper procedures and good practices play a role much more important than trust. Their lack determines failure, while the lack of trust is not only non-fatal, but even quite common.

This observation may shed new light on the issue of trust in knowledge-intensive cultures. However, further research is needed to determine its scope and limitations.

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