

Connotation, Theory and Prospects of Trust Repair

Cuilian Zeng*, Ying Chen

School of Vocational Education, Tianjin University of Technology and Education, Tianjin 300222, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: *Trust repair refers to the process after trust violation in which the trustor and the violator make joint efforts to restore trust to its pre-violation level. Key theories include attribution theory, social equilibrium theory, structural mechanism theory, and the two-way trust repair model. Building on prior work, this paper proposes a hierarchical decision-making model of trust repair that integrates attribution, context, and interpersonal factors, examines the transition between trust and violation states, clarifies the internal mechanism of trust repair, and offers a solid theoretical basis for empirical research.*

Keywords: Trust; Trust repair; Hierarchical decision-making model.

1. Introduction

Trust is an indispensable issue in social development and the bedrock of social stability [1]. Yet as times change, trust violations occur frequently; abundant research shows such breaches yield a string of negative effects, making trust repair one of the “most important yet unsolved” problems in current trust studies. Moreover, although trust anchors society, it is inherently unstable and fragile [2], so once damaged it struggles to return to its prior level [3]. Today, with trust violations rising, uncovering the psychological mechanisms behind trust repair is increasingly urgent [4]. At the individual level, trust repair fosters sound interpersonal ties and thus promotes healthy psychological growth [5]; at the organizational level, it facilitates cooperation and communication among members [6]; at the societal level, it helps build a harmonious, stable society. Thus, trust operates crucially from micro to macro dimensions.

2. Definition of Trust Repair

Prior research typically treats trust as a psychological process combining cognitive and affective dimensions, so scholars define trust repair around these two axes. Cognitively, Kim et al. view trust repair as post-violation activities that make the trustor’s beliefs and intentions more positive. Affectively, Lewicki’s dynamic model argues that a violation damages not only cognition but also inflicts emotional harm on the victim [7]; Tomlinson et al. see trust repair as eliminating negative and cultivating positive emotions to mend broken trust.

3. Research Methods in Trust Repair

Trust-repair studies mainly use experiments, supplemented by scenario simulations and questionnaires [3,8]. Repair is a dynamic process comprising trust building, violation, and repair. The building phase

often employs trust-game paradigms, promoting trust via direct or vicarious reinforcement [9]; the violation phase introduces “accidents” or “no/ minimal return of investments” to rupture newly formed trust; the repair phase tests strategies such as silence, denial, financial compensation, or oversight to restore damaged trust.

4. Bidirectional Trust Repair Theory

Early trust-repair theories include attribution theory, social balance theory, structural-mechanism theory, and two-way trust-repair theory. Among them, the two-way trust-repair model proposed by Kim et al. reflects a bilateral perspective based on both parties, analyzes trust repair at three levels, and emphasizes the role of the trustor; thus some scholars believe this model may become the dominant lens for future trust-repair research.

The two-way trust-repair model proposes three basic assumptions: (1) the violator wants to be seen as trustworthy, so after a violation they assert they should be trusted; (2) the trustor tends to view the violator as untrustworthy unless they wish to maintain the relationship; (3) whether trust can be repaired depends on the relative strength of the efforts both trustor and violator devote to their respective beliefs.

In addition, a three-level progressive structure for trust repair is proposed. In the first level, when a trust violation occurs, the violator insists on their innocence, while the trustor tries hard to maintain the view that the violator is guilty. In the second level, if a violation has indeed occurred, one can no longer deny its occurrence and needs to attribute the violation to situational factors {{F10}}. In the third level, if the violation is indeed caused by the individual factors of the violator, the occurrence of the violation needs to be attributed to some unstable factors {{F9}}.

In short, this theory takes into account the influence of the trustor on trust repair, which was neglected in previous studies, and also considers the influence of various factors on trust repair. It shows that trust repair is a two - way, dynamic, and gradual process. However, this theoretical model lacks an in - depth exploration of the internal operating mode of the trust repair process {{FN}}.

5. A Hierarchical Decision-Making Model of Trust Repair

Based on the two-way trust model, this paper proposes a hierarchical decision-making model of trust repair (see Figure 1), detailing the three levels in the repair process and the strategies each party adopts at each level to achieve repair.

At level 1, to repair damaged trust, the violator must persuade the trustor that the breach was unintentional, making repair easier. When no evidence shows intent or evidence is insufficient, silence or denial should be used to convince the trustor of unintentionality, facilitating repair. When evidence shows intent, the process moves to the next stage.

In Level 2, once it is confirmed the violator acted intentionally, the violation must be attributed to external (situational) rather than internal (personal) factors. If the trustor has solid evidence the breach was deliberate, the violator should offer excuses that place the cause on situational factors, give a reasonable explanation for the violation under those circumstances, and sincerely express remorse and apology, thereby promoting trust repair. If, however, the trustor rejects the situational account and insists the breach stems from the violator’s personal traits, further excuses backfire and harm later repair; the process should move to the next stage—admit fault and adopt more effective measures.

In Level 3, when it is determined that the violation behavior is caused by personal factors, the trustor needs to be convinced that such personal traits are changeable rather than fixed. Because stable personal traits indicate that similar violation behaviors will occur in the future, while unstable personal traits can, to a certain extent, make the trustor believe that this violation is an accidental event and may not happen again in the future, which is conducive to trust repair. When the trustor believes that the violation behavior is due to personal factors, the violator can tell the trustor by making a commitment and voluntarily offering to accept supervision that this violation is caused by unstable personal characteristics and will strive to avoid such situations in the future relationship maintenance. Then, by providing compensation, expressing remorse, apologizing, and self - punishing

6. Conclusion and Outlook

6.1 Conclusion

Research on trust repair has grown across disciplines, yet remains limited, leaving ample ground for future work. Grounded in the two-way trust model, this paper proposes a layered decision model of trust repair that integrates attribution, context, and interpersonal factors. It details possible scenarios at each layer, explores inter-layer links, and outlines the internal mechanics of repair. The model deepens scholars' understanding and helps individuals respond more effectively after trust violations.

6.2 Outlook

The development of trust is a unique ^[2] in human society; as trust violations multiply, trust repair has become urgent. The hierarchical decision-making model of trust repair proposed here deepens understanding of the process and, building on prior work, points to a possible direction for future research. Future studies can probe three areas to better guide real-world trust repair.

6.2.1 Influence of third parties on the trust repair process

Chinese culture prizes guanxi, renqing, and mianzi; evaluations of a person are shaped by others' views, so examining third-party effects on trust repair carries real-world weight. With scant existing research on third parties' potential role, incorporating them widens the lens.

6.2.2 Impact of gratitude on trust repair after violation

Studies show gratitude sends a positive, relationship-building signal, making the thanked party more trusting. Unpacking how gratitude operates in trust repair can clarify its link to trust levels and furnish deeper theoretical support for mending broken trust.

6.2.3 Trust repair research across cultures

Although existing studies note that cultural background affects trust repair, further research is needed on how individuals from different cultures vary in accepting and responding to different trust-repair strategies, and on the cultural-psychological mechanisms behind these differences, so as to guide more effective trust repair in cross-cultural communication and cooperation.

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