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Is Trust Valued When It's Rare? When and How Subordinates' Perception of Being Trusted Leads to Counterproductive Work Behavior

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Abstract

Perceived being trusted constitutes an important component in trust-related research and has gradually garnered attention from scholars in recent years. Previous studies have predominantly held that subordinates' perceived being trusted by their supervisors generates positive effects for both the subordinates themselves and the organization as a whole, while neglecting its potential negative effects. Grounded in self-evaluation theory, this research employs experimental studies (Studies 1 and 2) and a multi-time-point, multi-source field questionnaire survey (Study 3) to investigate the potential dark side of subordinates' perceived being trusted. The findings demonstrate that subordinates' perceived being trusted triggers psychological entitlement, which subsequently increases their counterproductive work behavior, with subordinates' perceived scarcity of trust serving as a moderator in this process. Specifically, when subordinates perceive high scarcity of trust, the positive mediating effect of perceived being trusted on counterproductive work behavior through psychological entitlement is significant; conversely, when subordinates perceive low scarcity of trust, the aforementioned mediating effect becomes non-significant. This study uncovers the potential negative effects of perceived being trusted and clarifies its underlying mechanism and boundary conditions on counterproductive work behavior, thereby providing a more comprehensive and dialectical research perspective for trust-related research, while also extending relevant research on psychological entitlement and counterproductive work behavior.

Full Text

Trust is Valued in Proportion to Its Rarity? How and When Feeling Trusted Leads to Counterproductive Work Behavior

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Abstract

Feeling trusted represents a crucial component of trust research and has gradually attracted scholars' attention in recent years. While previous studies have predominantly argued that subordinates' feeling trusted by their supervisors generates positive outcomes for both employees and organizations, they have overlooked its potential negative effects. Grounded in self-evaluation theory, this paper employs experimental studies (Studies 1 and 2) and a multi-timepoint, multi-source field survey (Study 3) to investigate the potential dark side of feeling trusted. Results demonstrate that feeling trusted triggers subordinates' psychological entitlement, which subsequently increases their counterproductive work behavior. Perceived rarity of trust moderates this process: when subordinates perceive trust as highly scarce, the positive indirect effect of feeling trusted on counterproductive work behavior through psychological entitlement is significant; when perceived scarcity is low, this indirect effect becomes non-significant. This research uncovers the potential negative consequences of feeling trusted, clarifies its mechanisms and boundary conditions affecting counterproductive work behavior, provides a more comprehensive and dialectical perspective for feeling trusted research, and extends the literature on psychological entitlement and counterproductive work behavior.

Keywords: Trust; Feeling trusted; Psychological entitlement; Counterproductive work behavior; Perceived rarity of trust

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly diversified organizational structures, trust constitutes a vital component of interpersonal relationships in work environments and is considered essential for reducing organizational operating costs and enhancing team effectiveness (Li Xinchun, 2002; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Yao, Zhang, & Brett, 2017). Over the past two decades, trust research has garnered growing attention from scholars (Chen Yue, Shi Kan, & Luo Dongxia, 2010; Qin Xin & Ju Dong, 2011; De Jong, Dirks, & Gillespie, 2016; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001;

Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Trust refers to one party's willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party (Mayer et al., 1995). When individuals anticipate that another's behavior is important to them, they become more willing to accept vulnerability to that party's actions regardless of their ability to monitor them, thus increasing their trust in that party (Mayer et al., 1995). Existing research has found that supervisors' trust in subordinates positively influences subordinates' work attitudes and performance (Duan Jinyun & Tian Xiaoming, 2011; Wei Huimin & Long Lirong, 2009; Yu Haibo, Fang Liluo, Ling Wenquan, & Zheng Xiaoming, 2007).

Like two sides of a coin, subordinates' feeling trusted by their supervisor reflects the extent to which subordinates perceive their supervisor's willingness to accept vulnerability and risk regarding their actions (Baer et al., 2015). Trust and feeling trusted are related but distinct constructs (Brower, Lester, Korsgaard, & Dineen, 2009). Currently, research on feeling trusted remains in its preliminary stages. Existing studies have found that subordinates' feeling trusted by their supervisor can enhance organization-based self-esteem and job performance (Lau, Lam, & Wen, 2014) while also strengthening felt obligation norms and organizational performance (Salamon & Robinson, 2008). Thus, conventional wisdom and most existing research suggest that feeling trusted benefits both subordinates and organizations.

However, is feeling trusted always beneficial? This paper argues that previous research has exaggerated the benefits of being trusted while neglecting its potential costs, leaving the possible negative consequences of feeling trusted underexplored. Indeed, a few scholars have recently raised questions about this assumption (Wang Hongli & Zhang Qianjun, 2016; Baer et al., 2015). For example, Wang Hongli et al. (2016) found that feeling trusted by supervisors increases subordinates' workload and job stress, thereby elevating emotional exhaustion. Although recent research has preliminarily revealed the potential harm of feeling trusted, these studies have focused exclusively on individual resource perspectives, examining how feeling trusted affects employee stress and emotional exhaustion, and have not fully captured other possible negative consequences (Baer et al., 2015). In light of this gap, this paper explores the effect of feeling trusted on employees' counterproductive work behavior from a novel perspective—self-evaluation. Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) refers to intentional acts by individuals that harm or have the potential to harm the legitimate interests of their organization or stakeholders (Spector et al., 2006). As a common form of employee negative behavior, CWB causes substantial organizational losses (Zhang Yongjun, Liao Jianqiao, & Zhao Jun, 2012; Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Ju, Xu, Qin, & Spector, forthcoming; Zheng, Qin, Liu, & Liao, 2019). Given trust's important role in organizations, examining the potential negative effects of feeling trusted challenges the mainstream research assumption that being trusted is always beneficial, provides a more comprehensive and dialectical perspective for feeling trusted research, and extends current understanding of its harmful effects beyond resource conservation to other domains.

To address these issues, this paper draws upon self-evaluation theory (Markus & Wurf, 1987) and trust literature (De Jong et al., 2016; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Lau et al., 2014) to explore how and when feeling trusted leads to employee CWB, aiming to open the black box of feeling trusted's negative effects. Self-evaluation theory posits that individuals continuously engage in self-cognition and evaluation influenced by their social environment and social information (Korman, 1970), forming corresponding self-concepts (Gecas, 1982) that subsequently influence their attitudes and behaviors (Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989). According to self-evaluation theory, supervisors' trust represents important social information that employees receive in the workplace and significantly influences employees' self-concepts (Mishra & Mishra, 2012; Pfeffer, 1998). Since trust possesses special, scarce attributes in organizations (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), it conveys to employees that those who receive supervisors' trust are rare and unique, prompting employees to develop self-evaluations and self-concepts of being distinctive and scarce, thereby triggering psychological entitlement (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004)—the immediate feeling that one deserves more or special treatment compared to peers (Campbell et al., 2004; Qin, Chen, Yam, Huang, & Ju, forthcoming; Yam, Klotz, He, & Reynolds, 2017)—which subsequently increases CWB. Furthermore, this paper examines the boundary conditions of this effect by proposing the moderating role of employees' perceived rarity of trust. In summary, this paper investigates the internal mechanism and boundary conditions through which subordinates' feeling trusted influences their CWB from a self-evaluation perspective (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

[Figure 1: see original paper]

1.1 Self-Evaluation Theory and Subordinates' Feeling Trusted

Self-evaluation theory suggests that individuals' self-evaluations are shaped by their social environment and social information (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Pettigrew, 1967), particularly when information originates from important organizational figures (e.g., leaders) and contains positive evaluations (Gecas, 1982; Turner, 1978). Integrating trust literature, leaders serve as important sources of social information for employees in the workplace (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), and trust reflects leaders' positive evaluations. Therefore, when employees feel trusted by their supervisors, they are more likely to incorporate this information into their self-evaluation processes, and the resulting self-concept subsequently influences their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. In summary, self-evaluation theory provides an appropriate theoretical lens for explaining subordinates' perceptions and behaviors after feeling trusted.

1.2 Subordinates' Feeling Trusted and Psychological Entitlement

Based on self-evaluation theory (Markus & Wurf, 1987) and trust literature (Lau et al., 2014; Mayer et al., 1995), this study proposes that feeling trusted triggers subordinates' psychological entitlement¹. Trust reflects one party's willingness to accept vulnerability to another's actions (Mayer et al., 1995), manifested through behaviors such as reliance on competence and information disclosure. Correspondingly, feeling trusted reflects individuals' perception of others' willingness to accept risk and expose vulnerability (Baer et al., 2015).

For employees, feeling trusted by supervisors carries important symbolic meaning, signifying that their competence and character have gained supervisory recognition, making them "insiders" who receive competitive advantages in performance evaluations and career development. However, supervisors typically trust only a few team members (Chen, He, & Weng, 2018; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), meaning that trust from supervisors possesses unique, scarce attributes for employees. This conveys social information that those who receive supervisors' trust are rare and unique. Since self-evaluation processes are influenced by social comparison (Pettigrew, 1967), individuals' perceptions of how common their possessions (or attributes) are in organizations affect their self-evaluation processes (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989; Jemmott, Ditto, & Croyle, 1986). Particularly when individuals possess desirable attributes that are scarce, they tend to exaggerate this scarcity during self-evaluation, thereby widening the distinction between themselves and others (Goethals, 1986; Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1984). Consequently, when employees feel trusted, they believe they possess stronger competence or higher character than other team members, can make unique contributions that others cannot, and represent a rare presence in the organization—forming a scarce, unique self-concept. Perceptions of one's own scarcity and uniqueness constitute important factors influencing psychological entitlement; the stronger employees' self-concept of scarcity and uniqueness in organizations, the more likely they are to experience psychological entitlement (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). In summary, because trust from leaders possesses scarce, unique attributes, subordinates' feeling trusted may trigger their psychological entitlement. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Subordinates' feeling trusted is positively related to their psychological entitlement.

1.3 Psychological Entitlement and Counterproductive Work Behavior

Individuals' psychological entitlement is closely associated with inflated self-cognition (Levine, 2005) and ego-centric orientation (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). This inflated self-cognition and unrealistic expectations regarding rewards and interpersonal interactions distort individuals' reciprocity beliefs, making them more likely to respond with negative behaviors such as CWB (Zhou Ruyi, Long

Lirong, & He Wei, 2016; Jordan, Ramsay, & Westerlaken, 2017; Naumann, Minsky, & Sturman, 2002). Previous research indicates that psychological entitlement's behavioral outcomes can be explained through equity theory (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987). While employees typically expect fair input-output ratios at work, psychological entitlement disrupts this perception process (Huseman et al., 1987). Individuals high in psychological entitlement tend to hold excessively positive self-perceptions, attributing desirable outcomes to their own efforts and expecting matching returns. This inflated self-cognition and self-serving attribution lead high-entitlement individuals to believe they deserve more than others or special treatment (Zhou Ruyi, Long Lirong, & Zhang Junwei, 2018; Harvey & Martinko, 2009), regardless of their actual performance and contributions. Therefore, when these inflated expectations remain unmet, individuals may experience feelings of injustice and consequently engage in destructive CWB to offset this unmet sense and unfairness (Campbell et al., 2004; Qin et al., forthcoming; Yam et al., 2017)². Empirical research confirms that individuals with higher psychological entitlement are more likely to prioritize their own needs over others' (Harvey & Martinko, 2009), behave more selfishly, help others less (Zitek et al., 2010), and engage in more deviant behaviors (Levine, 2005; Qin et al., forthcoming; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Accordingly, building on Hypothesis 1, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Subordinates' psychological entitlement is positively related to their counterproductive work behavior.

Hypothesis 3: Subordinates' feeling trusted influences their counterproductive work behavior by enhancing psychological entitlement.

1.4 The Moderating Role of Perceived Rarity of Trust

As discussed, psychological entitlement arises from subordinates' scarce, unique self-concept formed through feeling trusted. This self-concept formation largely depends on how subordinates view trust within their team—that is, the perceived scarcity of the trust they receive from supervisors. Although trust from supervisors is generally scarce in organizations, in certain contexts (e.g., teams with supervisors low in trust propensity or with limited delegation), subordinates may more strongly perceive supervisory trust as scarce within the team. When individuals perceive higher scarcity of supervisory trust in their context, it means that employees possessing this trust are more special, making feeling trusted more likely to trigger their evaluation of their own scarcity and uniqueness, and consequently more likely to induce psychological entitlement. Conversely, in contexts where subordinates perceive lower scarcity of trust (e.g., teams with supervisors high in trust propensity or self-managing teams), the perception of being special derived from feeling trusted weakens, and subordinates' psychological entitlement diminishes accordingly. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: Subordinates' perceived rarity of trust moderates the relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement. Specifically, when

perceived rarity of trust is high, the positive relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement is significant; when perceived rarity of trust is low, this relationship is non-significant.

Building on Hypotheses 3 and 4, we further propose a moderated mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Subordinates' perceived rarity of trust moderates the indirect effect of feeling trusted on counterproductive work behavior through psychological entitlement. Specifically, when perceived rarity of trust is high, the indirect effect of feeling trusted on counterproductive work behavior via psychological entitlement is significant; when perceived rarity of trust is low, this indirect effect is non-significant.

1.5 Overview of Studies

This research employs multiple study designs and diverse samples to test the theoretical model, comprising two experimental studies (Studies 1 and 2) and one questionnaire survey study (Study 3). This panoramic research approach provides richer and more robust empirical evidence for the hypotheses (Chatman & Flynn, 2005), thereby enhancing both internal and external validity (Ju et al., 2019; Qin, Ren, Zhang, & Johnson, 2015).

2. Study 1: Method and Results

2.1.1 Sample

In Study 1, we recruited 115 full-time employees from various Chinese enterprises through the authors' alumni networks. Among participants, 47% were female, with an average age of 28.7 years ($SD = 7.70$), average education of 16.3 years ($SD = 1.33$), and average organizational tenure of 3.92 years ($SD = 5.58$). Participants represented diverse industries, including manufacturing (14.8%), banking (16.5%), construction (19.1%), and others (49.6%).

2.1.2 Experimental Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either the feeling trusted condition ($n = 58$) or the control condition ($n = 57$) and were asked to recall a specific work situation with their supervisor. After recollection, participants described the interaction process.

Manipulation of feeling trusted. This study employed the critical incident technique to manipulate feeling trusted, a method widely used in social psychology and organizational behavior experiments (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Bobocel, 2013; Liang et al., 2016). Specifically, in the experimental condition (feeling trusted group), participants recalled an incident where their supervisor demonstrated trust in them while completing a work task. To facilitate recall, we provided several examples based on items adapted from the feeling trusted

scale (Mayer & Gavin, 2005), such as “Your supervisor let you play an important role in work that was important to him/her” and “Your supervisor relied on your judgment regarding work-related issues and felt it was unnecessary to monitor your work.” An example description from the experimental group: “At the end of July, after communicating with a client about a basic loan dispute case involving tens of millions of yuan, I drafted a complete litigation plan within one day, researched four important issues, and proposed solutions. After reviewing my plan, my supervisor said it was completely fine. Subsequently, my supervisor confidently allowed me to communicate independently with the client. After answering several rounds of client inquiries, we secured the client’s commission, and our team represented the client in the litigation, helping my supervisor generate nearly one million yuan in revenue.”

In the control condition, participants recalled an incident where they completed a work task under their supervisor’s guidance and direction³. Corresponding examples were developed based on the manipulation examples for feeling trusted, such as “Your supervisor required you to follow his/her guidance to solve problems important to him/her” and “Your supervisor believed in his/her own judgment regarding work-related issues and felt it was necessary to monitor your work.” A control group example: “For an important meeting requiring PowerPoint slides, after I created the initial draft, my supervisor reviewed it and guided me to make revisions. After completing the revised version, my supervisor still asked me to send the PPT directly to him for further modifications and chose to handle sensitive financial and business issues himself rather than guiding me.”

After the recall task, participants described the recalled situation in detail. Following the manipulation, participants completed an unrelated description task (i.e., describing what they typically do on weekends) as a filler task (Berger, Meredith, & Wheeler, 2008). Subsequently, participants completed a questionnaire measuring psychological entitlement, manipulation checks, and demographic variables.

2.1.3 Measures

This study utilized established scales from previous research whenever possible to ensure high reliability and validity. For English scales in Studies 1 and 3, we followed Brislin’s (1980) standard translation and back-translation procedures to ensure measurement equivalence. Unless otherwise specified, all scales in the three studies used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Psychological entitlement. We used Campbell et al.’s (2004) psychological entitlement scale, which includes 9 items such as “Honestly, I feel I deserve more accolades than others.” This study measured participants’ immediate feelings. Cronbach’s α was 0.84.

Manipulation check. Adapted from Mayer and Gavin’s (2005) trust scale,

this measure included 10 items such as “My supervisor would let me play an important role in work that was important to him/her.” In this study, we adapted it to “In the event I just recalled, my supervisor would let me play an important role in work that was important to him/her.” Cronbach’s α was 0.81.

2.2.1 Manipulation Check

We first tested the experimental manipulation. T-test results showed that participants in the experimental condition reported significantly higher levels of feeling trusted ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.48$) than those in the control condition ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.41$, $t(113) = 3.62$, $p < 0.001$), with an effect size of Cohen’s $d = 0.67$. Thus, the manipulation of feeling trusted in Study 1 was successful.

2.2.2 Hypothesis Testing

We used t-tests for hypothesis analysis. Results showed that participants in the feeling trusted condition reported significantly higher psychological entitlement ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.56$) than those in the control condition ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.42$, $t(113) = 2.24$, $p = 0.03$), with an effect size of Cohen’s $d = 0.42$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Study 1 established the causal relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement. However, Study 1 had certain limitations. Although our theoretical reasoning is not limited to specific cultural contexts, our sample was exclusively from China, limiting generalizability. To address this limitation and further verify the robustness and generalizability of our findings, we replicated the results using a sample of full-time employees from the United States recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and further examined the moderating role of perceived rarity of trust (Study 2).

3. Study 2: Method and Results

3.1.1 Sample

In Study 2, we recruited 145 full-time employees from the United States through MTurk. Previous research indicates that data collected through MTurk exhibit similar psychometric properties to convenience samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Qin, Huang, Johnson, Hu, & Ju, 2018). Participants received \$0.40 for completing the experiment. The sample consisted of 50.30% female employees; 73.10% Caucasian, 14.48% African American/Hispanic/Latino, 8.96% Asian, 2.76% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.70% other. The average age was 36.92 years ($SD = 10.21$), average education was 15.79 years ($SD = 2.67$), and average organizational tenure was 7.28 years ($SD = 7.26$). Participants represented various industries, including healthcare (13.79%), information technology (11.72%), education (13.10%), and others (61.39%).

3.1.2 Experimental Design and Procedure

Participants first reported their perceived rarity of trust in their organizations. The subsequent experimental procedure mirrored Study 1: participants were randomly assigned to either the feeling trusted condition ($n = 73$) or the control condition ($n = 72$) and received the same manipulation as Study 1. An example description from the experimental group: “I was on duty in the company resource room, and my supervisor let me manage and attend to clients using the resource room on my own. She let me choose which activities or interactions to conduct with clients, even though she also liked making decisions. She trusted me very much to conduct activities with clients without her direct supervision.” A control group example: “I needed to write a report about a Federal Emergency Management Agency review for a specific 106 project. Since I had never completed a similar project before, my supervisor sent me an email telling me the project number and giving me key points to follow for this project. The next day, I received another email from her about checking the project, asking me to send her what I had completed so far so she could ensure I was following the specific format she had listed in the previous email.” After the manipulation, participants completed the filler task and questionnaires measuring psychological entitlement, manipulation checks, and demographics.

3.1.3 Measures

Perceived rarity of trust. Adapted from Vincent and Kouchaki’s (2016) perceived rarity of creativity scale, this measure included 3 items such as “Being trusted by one’s supervisor is rare in my work team.” Cronbach’s α was 0.92.

Psychological entitlement. Consistent with Study 1, we used Campbell et al.’s (2004) psychological entitlement scale. Cronbach’s α was 0.90.

Manipulation check. Consistent with Study 1, we used the 10-item scale adapted from Mayer and Gavin’s (2005) trust scale. Cronbach’s α was 0.82.

3.2.1 Manipulation Check

Consistent with Study 1, we first tested the experimental manipulation. T-test results showed that participants in the experimental condition reported significantly higher levels of feeling trusted ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.61$) than those in the control condition ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.68$, $t(143) = 6.11$, $p < 0.001$), with an effect size of Cohen’s $d = 1.00$. Thus, the manipulation of feeling trusted in Study 2 was successful.

3.2.2 Hypothesis Testing

We used ordinary least squares regression for hypothesis analysis. Specific results are presented in Table 1. In Model 1 of Table 1, we regressed psychological entitlement on feeling trusted and perceived rarity of trust, showing a positive

relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.03$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

In Model 2 of Table 1, we added the interaction term between feeling trusted and perceived rarity of trust, which showed a significant positive relationship with psychological entitlement ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = 0.01$). Simple slope analysis revealed that when participants perceived high rarity of trust in their organizations, feeling trusted significantly enhanced psychological entitlement ($b = 0.59$, $t = 3.42$, $p = 0.001$). When participants perceived low rarity of trust, feeling trusted had no significant effect on psychological entitlement ($b = -0.04$, $t = -0.26$, $p = 0.80$). The difference between these slopes was significant ($b = 0.64$, $t = 2.59$, $p = 0.01$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported. To visually represent the moderating effect of perceived rarity of trust, we plotted the relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement at high and low levels of perceived rarity of trust (one standard deviation above and below the mean), as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

Studies 1 and 2 provided strong causal evidence for the effect of feeling trusted on psychological entitlement and tested the moderating role of perceived rarity of trust. Both studies validated the internal validity of the theoretical model but were limited in external validity. Therefore, in the next study (Study 3), we extended the external validity of our conclusions through a multi-timepoint, multi-source questionnaire survey while examining subordinates' counterproductive work behavior to test the full model.

4. Study 3: Method and Results

4.1.1 Sample and Procedure

Study 3 employed a field questionnaire survey using a multi-source, multi-timepoint design. We recruited participants through alumni networks of several domestic universities. This approach invited employees from various industries and positions and their direct supervisors, increasing sample diversity and enhancing external validity. At Time 1 (T1), subordinates rated their feeling trusted, perceived rarity of trust, psychological entitlement, and demographics. At T1, we invited 208 subordinates, receiving 192 questionnaires (response rate = 92.31%). At Time 2 (T2, one week later), these employees' direct supervisors rated their subordinates' counterproductive work behavior. At T2, we invited 62 direct supervisors, receiving 60 questionnaires (response rate = 96.77%). To improve response quality and motivate participation, we provided 5 RMB to each subordinate per survey and 8 RMB to each supervisor per survey. We also emphasized strict confidentiality and the importance of honest responses in the questionnaire instructions. After matching multi-source, multi-timepoint questionnaires and eliminating samples with significant missing data, we obtained 60 valid supervisor questionnaires (valid rate = 96.8%) and 187 valid subordinate questionnaires (valid rate = 89.9%). On average, each supervisor rated 3 subordinates.

Regarding sample composition, 65.8% of respondents were female, with an average age of 27.8 years ($SD = 6.8$), average education of 15 years ($SD = 1.9$), average organizational tenure of 3.1 years ($SD = 4.0$), and average time working with their direct supervisor of 2.3 years ($SD = 2.7$). Respondents held various positions: 22.5% in administration, 18.7% in marketing, 8.0% in technical roles, 16.0% in finance, and 34.8% in other areas. Industry representation included manufacturing (20.3%), service (15.0%), banking (9.1%), information technology (21.4%), and others (34.2%).

4.1.2 Measures

Feeling trusted (T1). Consistent with Study 1, we used the feeling trusted scale adapted from Mayer and Gavin's (2005) trust scale. Cronbach's α was 0.84.

Perceived rarity of trust (T1). Consistent with Study 2, we used the perceived rarity of trust scale adapted from Vincent and Kouchaki's (2016) perceived rarity of creativity scale. Cronbach's α was 0.89.

Psychological entitlement (T1). Consistent with Study 1, we used Campbell et al.'s (2004) psychological entitlement scale. Cronbach's α was 0.91.

Counterproductive work behavior (T2). We used Spector et al.'s (2006) counterproductive work behavior scale, which includes 10 items such as "This subordinate intentionally wastes organizational resources." Supervisors rated their subordinates. Cronbach's α was 0.92.

Control variables (T1). Following previous research (e.g., Penney & Spector, 2005; Zheng et al., 2019), we controlled for subordinates' demographic variables including gender, age, education level, and time working with the direct supervisor to exclude these factors' influence (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). We controlled for gender because males tend to be more aggressive and more likely to engage in aggressive and counterproductive behaviors than females (Gonzalez-Mulé, DeGeest, Kiersch, & Mount, 2013). We controlled for education level because highly educated individuals find unethical behavior less acceptable (Browning & Zabriskie, 1983). We also controlled for age and time working with the direct supervisor because Berry, Ones, and Sackett's (2007) meta-analysis found that demographic variables such as age and tenure affect CWB—for instance, younger employees with shorter tenure exhibit more CWB. Controlling these variables allows us to isolate the predictive validity added by feeling trusted (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

4.1.3 Analytical Strategy

Given the nested data structure (supervisors rated multiple subordinates on CWB, $ICC1 = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$), we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) via Mplus 7.0 (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). Specifically, feeling trusted, perceived rarity of trust, and psychological entitlement were individual-level vari-

ables. Although CWB is theoretically an individual-level variable, the nested nature of supervisor ratings created variance at both individual and group levels. Therefore, while the overall model operates at the individual level, we used HLM to account for group-level variance in CWB due to supervisor ratings. Following previous research (e.g., Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009; Zheng et al., 2019), when testing main effects of Level 1 predictors, both raw scores and grand-mean centering are appropriate. Thus, we grand-mean centered all core predictors before entering them into regression models (Hofmann, Griffin, & Gavin, 2000). Because our team sizes were relatively small, making it difficult to effectively estimate Level 2 random effects (Theall et al., 2011), we fixed the slopes. Additionally, we used RMediation to test mediation effects (Tofghi & MacKinnon, 2011). To test moderated mediation, we employed Edwards and Lambert's (2007) moderated path analysis approach, calculating the indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable through the mediator at levels of the moderator one standard deviation above and below the mean.

4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables.

4.2.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To examine the distinctiveness of the four variables—feeling trusted, perceived rarity of trust, psychological entitlement, and counterproductive work behavior—we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus 7.0. We first parceled items. Since our primary goal was to ensure discrimination among core constructs rather than examining relationships among items within constructs, parceling was appropriate. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Zheng et al., 2019), for multi-dimensional variables, we created parcels based on conceptual dimensions: feeling trusted items (cognition-based and affection-based trust) and CWB items (organization-targeted and interpersonal-targeted) were each parceled into two parcels. For single-dimensional scales, we used the item-to-construct balance method (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002), creating three parcels for psychological entitlement. Results showed that the hypothesized four-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 34.58$, $df = 29$, $CFI = 0.99$, $TLI = 0.99$, $RMSEA = 0.03$, $SRMR = 0.04$) and fit significantly better than alternative models (detailed results available from the authors), indicating that the four variables represent distinct constructs.

4.2.3 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted that feeling trusted is positively related to psychological entitlement. As shown in Model 2 of Table 3, after controlling for age, education level, and time working with the supervisor, feeling trusted had a significant positive effect on psychological entitlement ($b = 0.17$, $t = 2.37$, $p = 0.02$). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that psychological entitlement is positively related to counterproductive work behavior. As shown in Model 5 of Table 3, psychological entitlement had a significant positive effect on CWB ($b = 0.04$, $t = 2.12$, $p = 0.03$). Hypothesis 2 was supported. Hypothesis 3 further predicted that psychological entitlement mediates the relationship between feeling trusted and CWB. To test mediation, we used RMediation to examine the significance of the product of the path coefficients from feeling trusted to psychological entitlement and from psychological entitlement to CWB. Results showed a significant mediation effect ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.005$, $95\% CI = [0.001, 0.015]$). Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that perceived rarity of trust positively moderates the relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement. As shown in Model 4 of Table 3, the interaction between feeling trusted and perceived rarity of trust had a significant positive effect on psychological entitlement ($b = 0.18$, $t = 2.72$, $p = 0.01$). Simple slope analysis revealed that when participants perceived high rarity of trust, feeling trusted significantly enhanced psychological entitlement ($b = 0.30$, $t = 4.34$, $p < 0.001$). When participants perceived low rarity of trust, feeling trusted had no significant effect on psychological entitlement ($b = 0.03$, $t = 0.34$, $p = 0.73$). The difference between these slopes was significant ($b = 0.27$, $t = 2.72$, $p = 0.01$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported. To visually represent the moderating effect, we plotted the relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement at high and low levels of perceived rarity of trust (one standard deviation above and below the mean), as shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

Hypothesis 5 predicted that perceived rarity of trust moderates the indirect effect of feeling trusted on CWB through psychological entitlement. Moderated mediation analysis showed that when perceived rarity of trust was high (one standard deviation above the mean), the indirect effect of feeling trusted on CWB via psychological entitlement was significant ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $95\% CI = [0.0003, 0.027]$). When perceived rarity of trust was low (one standard deviation below the mean), this indirect effect was non-significant ($b = 0.002$, $SE = 0.01$, $95\% CI = [-0.005, 0.010]$). The difference between these indirect effects was significant ($\Delta b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $95\% CI = [0.0002, 0.028]$). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

5. General Discussion

5.1 Summary of Findings

Based on self-evaluation theory, this research examined the effects of subordinates' feeling trusted on their counterproductive work behavior and its underlying mechanisms. Results revealed that feeling trusted increases subordinates' psychological entitlement, which in turn enhances their counterproductive work behavior. Subordinates' perceived rarity of trust moderates this process. When subordinates perceive trust as highly scarce, the positive indirect effect of feeling

trusted on counterproductive work behavior through psychological entitlement is significant; when perceived scarcity is low, this indirect effect becomes non-significant.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research makes important theoretical contributions to trust, psychological entitlement, and counterproductive work behavior literature. First, by exploring the potential dark side of feeling trusted, this study challenges the mainstream assumption in trust research that “trust is always beneficial.” The vast majority of existing research demonstrates that subordinates’ feeling trusted by supervisors produces positive effects for individuals and organizations (Sun Liping, Long Lirong, & Li Ziyi, 2018; Brower et al., 2009; Lau et al., 2014; Salamon & Robinson, 2008), typically examining trust as a social exchange relationship that yields positive employee outcomes such as increased job performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Brower et al., 2009) and enhanced job satisfaction (Lester & Brower, 2003). However, the extensive focus on trust’s positive effects may have led to overemphasis on its benefits while neglecting potential “costs.” Therefore, this research focuses on the possible negative consequences of feeling trusted. Through a self-evaluation perspective and deep analysis of trust’s “scarce” attributes, we reveal negative outcomes of feeling trusted: subordinates’ feeling trusted by supervisors triggers psychological entitlement, which subsequently increases counterproductive work behavior. By examining feeling trusted’s negative effects, this study provides a more comprehensive and dialectical perspective for understanding its consequences. Furthermore, we deeply explore the internal mechanism and boundary conditions linking feeling trusted to subordinates’ counterproductive work behavior, offering a novel theoretical explanation and empirical evidence for opening the black box between feeling trusted and unethical behavior. The few existing studies on feeling trusted’s negative effects have primarily adopted a resource conservation perspective, suggesting that feeling trusted increases work-related stress (e.g., role overload, job stress), leading to emotional exhaustion and decreased performance (Wang Hongli & Zhang Quanjun, 2016; Baer et al., 2015). This research explores from a new perspective—self-evaluation—and finds that feeling trusted may also lead to inflated self-perceptions (i.e., psychological entitlement) and subsequently increase counterproductive work behavior. Moreover, we examine the boundary conditions of this effect, finding that when subordinates perceive higher scarcity of trust in organizations, feeling trusted is more likely to internalize into subordinates’ self-concept, further strengthening their psychological entitlement and counterproductive work behavior. These results provide a fresh explanation, from an individual self-evaluation theoretical perspective, for why and when feeling trusted can lead to subordinates’ counterproductive work behavior, enriching feeling trusted research and responding to Baer et al.’s (2015) call for “strengthening research on feeling trusted and its important mechanisms.”

Second, this research identifies a new leadership behavior factor that triggers

employee counterproductive work behavior. Previous research indicates that leaders' negative interpersonal treatment (e.g., abusive supervision, unfair behavior) often constitutes an important antecedent of employee counterproductive behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Ferris, Spence, Brown, & Heller, 2012; Tepper, 2000, 2007). This study finds that, under certain conditions, leaders' positive behaviors (e.g., trust) may also trigger subordinates' counterproductive work behavior. By identifying and testing a new factor influencing employee counterproductive behavior, this research extends the counterproductive work behavior literature. Additionally, this study enriches psychological entitlement research by expanding exploration of its antecedents. Previous research shows that psychological entitlement often arises when employees engage in certain behaviors (e.g., forced organizational citizenship behavior; Yam et al., 2017) or experience negative treatment (e.g., unfair treatment; Zitek et al., 2010). This study finds that when employees perceive positive information they receive as extremely scarce, positive information conveyed by others (e.g., leader trust) may also trigger psychological entitlement. By identifying an important organizational antecedent of employee psychological entitlement, this research makes significant contributions to psychological entitlement literature.

5.3 Practical Implications

Our findings offer important insights for management practice. First, this research alerts managers to potential negative consequences after subordinates feel trusted. Since trust can enhance employees' confidence, increase organization-based self-esteem, and promote organizational citizenship behavior, trusting employees seems to have become managerial consensus. However, overemphasizing trust's importance and benefits may carry hidden risks. Managers need to recognize that when they fully trust a subordinate, that subordinate may unconsciously develop inflated self-cognition and heightened psychological entitlement. This sense of "deserving more and special treatment" may lead to unmet expectations and subsequently increase counterproductive work behavior, harming organizational interests. Therefore, supervisors need to understand that their well-intentioned trusting behaviors may also entail certain risks. With a more complete understanding of the feeling trusted phenomenon, supervisors can more effectively identify, adjust, and control negative tendencies in organizations, thereby managing teams more effectively.

Second, this research cautions managers against trusting only a very small number of subordinates. When supervisors trust only a few subordinates, those subordinates perceive trust as extremely scarce and feel more "special" for receiving such scarce resources, generating higher psychological entitlement. This intensified psychological entitlement may further harm organizational interests. Conversely, if supervisors extend trust to many subordinates in a team, subordinates perceive trust as less scarce, mitigating this negative effect. Therefore, to reduce subordinates' likelihood of developing superiority feelings, supervisors should avoid trusting only a select few subordinates.

Finally, this research encourages managers to properly analyze and understand employees' counterproductive work behavior. When supervisors observe counterproductive behavior, they typically attribute it to employees' personality problems rather than further analyzing the underlying psychological states. Beyond objective unfairness leading to "retaliatory" counterproductive behavior, employees' unconscious self-inflation may also cause such behavior. When employees' self-inflation leads to psychological entitlement, they spontaneously believe they deserve better, and when the external environment cannot meet their expectations, they engage in counterproductive behavior. Therefore, leaders need to deeply analyze the causes of employees' counterproductive behavior and adopt targeted measures from multiple perspectives (e.g., avoiding trusting only a few employees) to reduce and mitigate such behavior.

5.4 Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This research has several strengths, such as employing multiple study designs (experiments and surveys) and diverse samples (Chinese and American samples), thereby enhancing internal and external validity. However, limitations remain for future research to address. First, because feeling trusted and psychological entitlement are psychological variables that are difficult to measure through other-ratings, Study 3 may suffer from potential common method variance (CMV). The inclusion of moderating effects in Study 3 partially mitigates CMV concerns. Additionally, Studies 1 and 2 used experimental methods to test the causal relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement, confirming the theoretical framework and partially reducing this concern. Nevertheless, future research could employ other methods to control for CMV, such as separating the measurement of feeling trusted and psychological entitlement across time points or conducting longitudinal research. Moreover, Study 2' s American sample was recruited through MTurk, and online platform samples have certain ambiguities (Cheung, Burns, Sinclair, & Sliter, 2017). Future research could recruit full-time employees in the United States through field sampling to provide more robust empirical evidence for the generalizability of our conclusions.

Second, this research only examined the effect of feeling trusted on psychological entitlement and counterproductive work behavior. Future research could further explore other potential negative consequences and mechanisms of feeling trusted. Distinct from supervisors trusting subordinates, feeling trusted represents a new perspective for exploring trust from the subordinate' s viewpoint. Future research could more extensively investigate the negative effects and mechanisms of feeling trusted, providing more comprehensive development for the trust literature. For example, feeling trusted might also elevate subordinates' status, leading them to adopt strategies that harm colleagues to maintain their status, thereby damaging organizational interests. Additionally, when subordinates possess the scarce and valuable resource of trust, they may acquire greater "power," leading to more risky behaviors and decisions, even power abuse. Ac-

According to resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), subordinates possessing scarce intangible assets in teams or organizations have more power than other members, and powerful parties tend to engage in approach behaviors or decisions (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), potentially creating negative consequences. These alternative mediating mechanisms and negative outcomes warrant further exploration.

Third, this research focused primarily on the negative effects of feeling trusted. Future research could simultaneously examine the double-edged sword effects of feeling trusted and their boundary conditions. Supplementary analyses in Study 3 showed that after controlling for the positive mediating path of “feeling trusted—leader-member exchange (LMX)—counterproductive work behavior,” the negative effect path proposed in our model remained significant. This suggests that feeling trusted may have dual effects on subordinates. For instance, feeling trusted may increase subordinates’ gratitude under certain conditions, thereby improving job performance and organizational citizenship behavior to reciprocate supervisors; under other conditions, it may enhance psychological entitlement, thereby increasing counterproductive work behavior. Variables such as subordinates’ narcissism levels and perceived fairness may play important moderating roles, determining the relative strength of these two paths. We hope future research will further explore these possibilities.

Fourth, this research adopted a static perspective to explore the dark side of feeling trusted. However, recent leadership research has found that leadership behaviors exhibit fluctuations over time beyond between-individual differences (Ju et al., 2019; Qin et al., 2018). Therefore, future research could analyze the dark side of feeling trusted from a dynamic temporal perspective. Additionally, increasingly research shows that focusing on only one party in leader-subordinate relationships often fails to explain why leaders treat team members differently (e.g., ethical leadership behavior; Qin, Huang, Hu, Schminke, & Ju, 2018) or why team members exhibit specific behaviors (e.g., employee voice behavior; Xu, Qin, Dust, & Drenzo, 2019). Simultaneously examining both leaders and subordinates in matching studies better addresses these questions. Thus, future research could examine the effects of congruence between leaders’ perceived trust provision and subordinates’ feeling trusted. For example, when these perceptions are incongruent, subordinates may experience lower role clarity, thereby increasing work stress and emotional exhaustion.

Finally, this research primarily examined how subordinates’ subjective perception of the trust they receive from supervisors within their team influences their self-concept, psychological states, and behavioral reactions. However, because supervisors’ trust in subordinates is inherently unevenly distributed within teams, objective relative differences in trust received by each subordinate within the team also exist. These objective within-team differences more authentically reflect subordinates’ trust situations. Therefore, future research could consider sampling all team members and using group-mean centering to obtain subordinates’ relative position of feeling trusted within the team (Bliese, Maltarich,

& Hendricks, 2018), thereby more objectively examining the social comparison process of feeling trusted within teams. Additionally, because our research team sizes were relatively small (average team size = 3), making it difficult to effectively measure and reflect team-level relationships, future research could further examine these relationships at the team level (Bauer, Preacher, & Gil, 2006), such as how the mediating effect of psychological entitlement differs across teams and whether the relationship between feeling trusted and psychological entitlement varies by team.

6. Conclusion

Based on self-evaluation theory, this research explored the dark side of feeling trusted. Through experimental designs and multi-source, multi-timepoint surveys, we found that feeling trusted increases subordinates' counterproductive work behavior by elevating their psychological entitlement. This effect is moderated by subordinates' perceived rarity of trust: when perceived scarcity is high, the indirect effect of feeling trusted on counterproductive work behavior through psychological entitlement is significant; when perceived scarcity is low, this indirect effect is non-significant. This research provides a more comprehensive, dialectical perspective for feeling trusted research and offers new empirical evidence for antecedents of employee psychological entitlement and counterproductive work behavior.

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¹ This study conceptualizes psychological entitlement as a state-like variable, referring to individuals' immediate feeling that they deserve more or special treatment compared to peers (Campbell et al., 2004; Yam et al., 2017). Although previous research has tended to view psychological entitlement as a stable trait-like variable (Harvey & Martinko, 2009), recent psychological and management research has begun to conceptualize it as a state-like variable that can fluctuate momentarily (e.g., Vincent & Kouchaki, 2016; Qin et al., forthcoming; Yam et al., 2017; Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). Based on this, we define psychological entitlement as a state-like variable.

² In this situation, employees engage in counterproductive work behavior not for self-interest purposes (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006), but because they genuinely believe they are owed something; counterproductive work behavior is simply their way of “settling the score” with the team and team members. For individuals high in psychological entitlement, counterproductive work behavior represents a fair response to their work outcomes, even though their expected outcomes are biased and exaggerated by their inflated self-cognition and ego-centric orientation.

³ We set the control condition as “low trust” rather than “distrust” because “trust and distrust are not opposite ends of a single construct; the opposite of trust is not distrust” (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998, p. 448). Trust and distrust represent two distinct dimensions sharing common ground in that both imply expectations about others’ behavior. However, trust involves positive expectations that others will behave beneficially, whereas distrust involves negative expectations that others will behave harmfully (Lewicki et al., 1998). Based on this view, we set the control condition as low trust, where supervisors need to direct and monitor subordinates and do not share sensitive information with them.

A total of 151 participants completed the experiment. To ensure response quality, following previous research (Liang et al., 2016), we included a quality control item (“Please select ‘strongly agree’ ”) and excluded participants who failed this check. We also excluded completely irrelevant descriptions (e.g., non-sensical text, descriptions of non-work situations), resulting in a final analytical sample of 145 participants. The final valid sample did not differ significantly from excluded invalid samples on demographic variables ($p > 0.10$), indicating no sample attrition bias.

Our CFA results represent individual-level analysis. Considering the nested nature of the counterproductive work behavior data, we conducted multilevel CFA with counterproductive work behavior specified at the multilevel and other variables at the individual level (Dyer, Hanges, & Hall, 2005). The four-factor model results were: $\chi^2 = 153.02$, $df = 72$, $CFI = 0.92$, $TLI = 0.91$, $RMSEA = 0.08$, $SRMR = 0.06$.

To rule out potential interference from using grand-mean centering, we reanalyzed the data using group-mean centering for core variables. Results showed that our hypotheses remained supported after group-mean centering (detailed supplementary results available from the authors). Second, we tested whether our hypothesized negative effects of feeling trusted remained significant after controlling for the positive mediating path of “feeling trusted—leader-member exchange (LMX)—counterproductive work behavior.” Results showed that our hypothesized effects remained significant after controlling for this positive path (detailed supplementary results available from the authors).

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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