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Trust and Social Intelligence

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Extended Abstract

One of the strongest expression of generalized distrust – i.e., distrust of human nature in general – can be found in a Japanese proverb, "Its best to regard everyone as a thief" (*hito wo mitara dorobo to omoe*). An expression of the other extreme, generalized trust, can also be found in another Japanese proverb, "you will never meet a devil as you walk through the social world" (*wataru seken ni oni ha nai*). I asked about these proverbs to hundreds of students in several colleges in Japan and found that the majority of the respondents considered that those who believe the former proverb are smarter (66% vs. 34%) and more likely to be successful in life (54% vs. 46%). They believed that distrust means social shrewdness and trust means gullibility. The results of experimental and survey research, however, provide evidences contrary to this popular belief. Based on these findings, I will present an argument that trust and social intelligence co-evolve, and distrust and lack of social intelligence constitute a vicious cycle. On the one hand, generalized distrust prevents people from engaging in further social interactions. Low-trusters are unwilling to enter into potentially beneficial but risky social interactions because they focus on the risk side of such interactions. This unwillingness of distrusters to engage in potentially beneficial but risky social interactions deters them from correcting their depressed level of trust. At the same time, their unwillingness to engage in risky but potentially fruitful interactions prevents them from improving the level of their social intelligence. The lack of social intelligence or social shrewdness, in turn, makes them vulnerable in such risky but potentially fruitful interactions. This vulnerability will then have two consequences. First, the lack of social intelligence makes them more gullible when they do in fact engage in such interactions. They will more often have experiences of failure than success in such interactions, and they will further learn to distrust others. Second, realizing this vulnerability, they will avoid engaging in such interactions. By engaging in such social interactions, they learn to distrust. By not engaging in such social interactions, they lose opportunities to learn social shrewdness and improve their level of their social intelligence or the ability to understand own and other peoples internal state, and use that understanding in social relations.

After reviewing the experimental and survey research findings supporting my claim that high-trusters are more socially intelligent than distrusters, I'll present an argument

that the level of general trust reflects, both at the individual level and societal level, the overall level of opportunity costs for staying in the relatively stable and secure social relations in which untrustworthy behaviors are well controlled. We can make sense of these findings in terms of two general strategies to deal with social uncertainty and opportunity costs: opportunity seeking versus security seeking. Opportunity seekers look outside stable and secure relations and invest cognitive resources in developing the ability to predict other peoples behavior in an open environment. Because they accrue social skills to deal with social risks, they can afford to maintain a high level of general trust and enter into risky but potentially profitable relations. Security seekers, on the other hand, pay opportunity costs in exchange for the security that stable relations provide and invest cognitive resources in assessing the nature of interpersonal relations. They are good at detecting who would be an ally and everyone else is regarded as a potential enemy. The characteristics of high-trusters (i.e., the correlations between general trust and the perceived need to cooperate with others, the sense of self-determination, and the lack of social risk avoidance) are indicative of opportunity seekers who leave the security of commitment relations to pursue better opportunities. Conversely, the characteristics of believers in the thief proverb (i.e., the lack of a perceived need for cooperation or a sense of self-determination, social risk avoidance, and the lack of social skills) are likely characteristics of individuals who prefer not to deal with people outside of their secure relations. Which strategy people adopt depends on the opportunities open to them. An opportunity-seeking strategy is more adaptive in a social environment in which staying in the stable and secure relations entail large opportunity costs, so the social-explorer type of social intelligence is more likely to prosper there. In contrast, a commitment-formation strategy is more adaptive in a social environment in which stable and secure relations do not entail large opportunity costs, so the commitment-former or security-seeker type of social intelligence will prosper there.