

## Examining the effects of feeling trusted by supervisors in the workplace: A self-evaluative perspective

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### Summary

Trusting and feeling trusted are related but unique components of a trusting relationship. However, we understand relatively little about the effects of felt trust on work performance and organizational citizenship behavior. From a self-evaluative perspective, this study argued that when employees perceive that their supervisors trust them, their organization-based self-esteem is enhanced, leading them to perform better in the workplace. We tested our hypotheses on a sample of 497 teachers using two trust measures, that is, reliance and disclosure, and found support for them on the basis of the reliance (but not the disclosure) measure. The effect of felt trust especially reliance on the employees' work performances were mediated by their organization-based self-esteem. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**Keywords:** feeling trusted; organization-based self-esteem; reliance; self-evaluation; work performance

“To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.”

(George MacDonald; cited at thinkexist.com)

Interpersonal trust is an essential part of work relationships. It is difficult to imagine long-lasting cooperative work relationships existing without interpersonal trust. Trust in the workplace is characterized by a willingness to be vulnerable to other parties under the expectation that their intentions or behavior in important matters will be positive (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Trust has repeatedly been found to relate to many attitudinal and behavioral work consequences including organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

In trust relationships, trust and felt trust are very often related but not necessarily equivalent (Brower, Lester, Korsgaard, & Dineen, 2009; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Employees who feel trusted perceive that another party is willing to assume risk with them (Lau & Lam, 2008); that is, by expecting employees to act positively without monitoring their actions, the other party becomes vulnerable to those actions. When another party is willing to assume such vulnerability, the felt trust conveys to the trusted party that they are competent and responsible and will not exploit the exposed vulnerability (Lester & Brower, 2003; Salamon & Robinson, 2008). We propose that felt trust, that is, the realization of others' positive expectations and exposed vulnerability, is relatively unexplored in the trust literature, and that understanding trustees' perspectives on whether they are trusted by others will expand our knowledge of interpersonal trust mechanisms. The literature has relied on two major mechanisms to explain the effects of trust: the social-exchange mechanism, based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994), and the cognitive mechanism, based on the truster's reduced need to guard against potential harm and ability to focus on work (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). These two mechanisms portray trust in either an obligatory or reactive role. We propose

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that they do not capture the full extent of trust effects and that trust effects can be more proactive and self-driven, as the introductory quotation indicates.

We draw on the self-evaluative perspective to capture the essence of this new role performed by trust (Gecas, 1982; Jussim, Soffin, Brown, Ley, & Kohlhepp, 1992; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1999). Individuals often evaluate their own significance, worth, and competence as part of their self-concept (Gecas, 1982). We propose that when employees perceive that their supervisors trust them, the evaluation associated with the perceived supervisory trust enhances the employees' organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), a significant and consistent performance driver (Bowling, Eschleman, Wang, Kirkendall, & Alarcon, 2010; Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989).

Although previous research has shown how trust works within dyads (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), we know relatively little about how feeling trusted affects employee behavior and performance. Only a few recent studies have addressed the felt-trust construct including felt trust as a dependent variable (Lau, Liu, & Fu, 2007), as a collective construct (Salamon & Robinson, 2008), and the consequences of supervisory trust such as subordinate work performance and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Brower et al., 2009; Lester & Brower, 2003), job satisfaction (Lester & Brower, 2003), intention to quit (Brower et al., 2009), and team citizenship behavior (Lau & Lam, 2008). Although these studies bring the importance of felt trust in the workplace to our attention, many gaps remain, such as the effect of felt trust on employee work performance and its underlying theoretical mechanisms (Brower et al., 2009). We intend to address these concerns in this study.

This study contributes to the trust literature by broadening our understanding beyond the current obligatory view of interpersonal trust. In addition to the normative appropriateness explanations (Salamon & Robinson, 2008) and social-exchange arguments (Lester & Brower, 2003), we introduce the self-evaluative perspective, a new and complementary way to explain felt trust effects. Second, we gain further insight into what mediates the relationship between trust and employee performance (De Jong & Elfring, 2010). Despite the vast amount of empirical work on trust and performance, many trust researchers have identified a lack of research on *how* trust affects performance (De Jong & Elfring, 2010; Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Although Lester and Brower (2003) found that felt trust is positively associated with trustees' performance, they did not measure the exact mechanism. Mayer and Gavin (2005) proposed that an employee's ability to focus is the crucial mediator between trust and performance; however, their empirical results indicated that the relationship was not significant. In this study, we show how an employee's work performance is driven by felt trust through OBSE. Third, we examine felt-trust mechanisms and employee performance at the individual level. Although Salamon and Robinson (2008) found that responsibility norms mediated the relationship between collective felt trust and store performance in terms of sales and customer service, they focused on groups in their analysis. Because we focus on individuals, we uncover different mediating mechanisms between felt trust and employee performance.

## Literature on Felt Trust

Trust usually takes place between two parties: the truster(s) and the trustee(s). However, trust is unidirectional in that one party's trust does not always attract reciprocation from the other party (Brower et al., 2009). In other words, trusters and trustees may have different views about their trusting relationship and therefore engage in different attitudes and behavior.

This asymmetry is often found within vertical dyads in which supervisors and subordinates possess distinct capabilities and powers. At the individual level, Brower et al. (2009) found that trust in a supervisor and trust in an employee were only moderately related. In contrast, Salamon and Robinson (2008) found a strong positive relationship between trust in management and employees' collective felt trust at the team level. They also found that feeling trusted had a significant effect on store performance above and beyond the influence of employee trust, thus demonstrating the unique effect of felt trust.

Although trusting and feeling trusted are two sides of the same coin, they are not the same. Trust represents a willingness to assume risk in a relationship based on positive expectations; and trustees may not realize the unspoken willingness and expectations, or misinterpret the intention underlying the trusting actions. In contrast, felt trust marks the perception and realization of others' positive expectations and exposes their willingness to be vulnerable. A key difference between these two constructs is their referents; the referent for trusting is the truster, and the referent for felt trust is the trustee.

Although trusting and feeling trusted share many similarities (e.g., the importance they place on a willingness to be vulnerable), they affect the corresponding trusters or trustees differently. From the trusters' viewpoint, the social-exchange perspective applies. When one party trusts another, he or she hopes their exposed vulnerability will not be exploited, and in exchange, the trusted party feels somewhat obligated to fulfill the hope (Deutsch, 1958; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). The former half of the argument has been applied to supervisor–subordinate trust studies, and supporting results have consistently found that when subordinates trust their supervisors, they engage in more citizenship behavior (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). The latter half of the argument relates to a powerful and widespread norm of reciprocity. When people receive help, favors, or gifts, they feel indebted to give at least as much in return to avoid hurting the giving party (Gouldner, 1960). Supporting the proposition of the obligation to return, Salamon and Robinson (2008) found that when management collectively trusts its employees, the employees develop responsibility norms to perform.

In addition to this sense of obligation, feeling trusted also provides trustees with salient social information. As the opening quotation indicates, being trusted represents a positive compliment, and trustees are often willing to accept such positive information and exert effort to maintain the status quo. In addition, as suggested by previous works on Pygmalion effects (Eden, 1990), a vote of confidence from significant coworkers enhances trustees' beliefs in their own ability and importance, increasing their motivation to complete difficult tasks. We expect felt trust to be a positive source of self-evaluation in the workplace.

## Felt Trust and OBSE

Self-esteem, or overall self-evaluation and assessment, represents how people think about themselves and how much they like themselves (Korman, 1970). The process and outcomes of evaluation are important in forming one's working self-concept (Gecas, 1982). In this study, rather than the global self-concept, we focus on employees' working self-concept, which refers to the contextually sensitive part of the self (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Markus & Wurf, 1987). We evaluate two areas: "a sense of competence, power or efficacy" and "a sense of virtue or moral worth" (Gecas, 1982, p. 5). A positive self-concept can positively influence employee attitudes and behavior in the workplace (Korman, 1970; Pierce et al., 1989).

Self-evaluation does not take place in a vacuum, and social context matters when forming self-esteem. Two forms of social information are important in the workplace. First, implicit signals from organizational structures and policies—such as job complexity, empowerment, high pay, and employee development programs—are sources of positive self-esteem for employees to perceive themselves as capable and willing (Gardner, Van Dyne, & Pierce, 2004; Six & Sorge, 2008). Second, explicit messages from supervisors and colleagues demonstrating that employees are valued by their organizations also promote employees' sense of worth in the organizations and hence their self-esteem. McAllister and Bigley (2002) supported the proposal that fulfilling employee needs, promoting employees' best interests, and valuing employee contributions are positive sources of employees' self-esteem. In their meta-analysis of the antecedents of OBSE, Bowling et al. (2010) found evidence that organizational and supervisor/coworker social supports are positively related to OBSE. From these findings, we can deduce that social context matters to the self-evaluation process in the workplace; therefore, we focus on OBSE, or "the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member" (Pierce & Gardner, 2004, p. 593), as our self-evaluation concept.

The self-evaluation literature has indicated that although social context matters, not every piece of social information is internalized as part of one's working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Two conditions are important for the integration of external information and internal evaluation. First, the information provider must be a significant other, and second, the social information must represent a positive assessment of the focal employee (Gecas, 1982; Turner, 1978). When these conditions are met, employees are likely to internalize the social information as part of their OBSE (Jussim et al., 1992).

In the workplace, supervisors represent sources of salient social information (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). They are formal performance appraisers, and their evaluations affect employees' pay and career development. Lau, Lam, and Salamon (2008) found that the higher the organizational rank of trusters, the stronger the effect of their trust. They also revealed that supervisors' evaluations are an important source of information in the workplace and may influence how employees perceive their social environments. Lau and Liden (2008) found that when leaders trust an employee, other employees follow their lead, especially when the environment is uncertain and ambiguous. Studies on OBSE have indicated that it can be shaped by information provided by salient others such as "role models, teachers, mentors, and those who evaluate the individual's work" (Pierce & Gardner, 2004, p. 594). In addition, Pierce et al. (1989) found respect from top management and OBSE to be positively correlated.

How employees interpret others' trust must be addressed. From an attributional perspective (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009; Weiner, 1985), trusted employees try to make sense of their supervisors' trust and search for reasons why they are trusted. One dimension of causal attribution is the locus of causality, that is, whether the trust is a result of the characteristics of the trustee (internal attribution) or other factors (external attribution). The research on self-serving bias has suggested that supervisory trust, representing a positive evaluation of trustees, is likely to be attributed internally (Heider, 1958). In other words, trusted employees attribute positive information from the perceived supervisory trust to their own self-concepts, thus enhancing their OBSE.

*Hypothesis 1:* Feeling trusted by supervisors is positively related to employees' OBSE.

When employees perceive that they are important and experience high levels of self-worth in the workplace, they try to maintain such expectations. The effects of self-consistency have been documented extensively and have shown that individuals verify their self-concepts by behaving according to the internal standards implied by their roles (Liu, Loi, & Lam, 2011; Stets & Burke, 2000; Swann, 1987). In other words, high-OBSE employees spend extra effort enhancing their work performance so that they can continue to be valuable to their organizations. Empirical results have consistently and robustly supported the proposition that OBSE is positively related to work performance and OCB (Bowling et al., 2010; Pierce & Gardner, 2004).

Following Mayer and Gavin's (2005) study on trust, we define work performance broadly to include task performance and OCB (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). When employees perceive that they are important and valued in the workplace and want to maintain the status quo, they will develop and maintain the quality and quantity of their work, as suggested by the classic job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). In addition, employees with high OBSE who enjoy social importance and status in their organizations are likely to feel as though they have more control and influence over their work behavior, which may motivate them to maintain their organizational importance and status (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012). OCB is discretionary in nature, and employees often have a choice as to whether and how much they want to participate in this type of behavior. Employees engage in OCB when they are willing and have abundant resources. When employees have high OBSE, they perceive that they are resourceful and have control over their work behavior because of their importance and abilities; therefore, they are more willing to perform OCB. Supporting this logic, LePine and Van Dyne (1998) found that self-esteem is positively related to voice behavior, a form of OCB.

*Hypothesis 2:* Employees' OBSE is positively related to their task performance.

*Hypothesis 3:* Employees' OBSE is positively related to their OCB.

Supervisory trust represents numerous things including a compliment, honor, a piece of social information, recognition, and positive feedback on which employees may adjust their work behavior. When employees feel trusted, they obtain signals and cues related to their task completion, work role achievement, and organizational norm compliance (Morrison, 1993). Ilgen, Fisher, and Taylor (1979) proposed that feedback is related to job performance when employees perceive the information accurately, accept it, and are willing to respond to it. In addition to social information, supervisory trust represents supervisors' willingness to assume risk with their subordinates by relying on them to either complete risky and important tasks or share sensitive information (Gillespie, 2003). A self-fulfilling prophecy suggests that high expectations and positive beliefs result in a strong performance (Eden, 1990). Being aware of supervisors' trust, we expect that trusted subordinates are willing to live up to their supervisor's expectations, put extra effort into completing assigned tasks, and protect the interests of their supervisors by keeping sensitive information to themselves.

Drawing on the self-evaluative perspective, we derive that when employees perceive that their supervisors trust them, they evaluate themselves positively and therefore enhance their OBSE. To maintain their self-esteem, trusted employees improve their task performance and OCB (Bowling et al., 2010; Pierce & Gardner, 2004).

*Hypothesis 4:* Feeling trusted by a supervisor is positively related to employees' task performance. This relationship is mediated by the employees' OBSE.

*Hypothesis 5:* Feeling trusted by a supervisor is positively related to employees' OCB. This relationship is mediated by the employees' OBSE.

## Method

### *Sample and data collection*

The sample in this study comprised schoolteachers in the non-tertiary education system of Macau, a special administrative region in southern China. In the school context, teachers conduct classes on their own and are required to make many decisions related to student affairs. In Macau, supervisors have the authority to inspect teachers' performances in the classroom and obtain feedback from students and their parents. However, if supervisors decide to trust their teachers and not actively monitor their work, they can become vulnerable to the teachers' behavior and decisions in the classrooms. For this reason, we considered schools to be appropriate for examining the effect of felt trust.

In our sample selection process, we randomly drew 38 schools from the Macau schools directory and asked the principals at these schools if they were interested in participating in the study. Eighteen schools (nine public and nine private) agreed to participate, generating a sampling frame of 952 schoolteachers. We distributed questionnaires to all of the schoolteachers at the 18 participating schools. We sent another set of questionnaires to the schools' principals, who passed them on to the teachers' supervisors (e.g., vice-principals, department heads, and subject heads) to provide ratings of the teachers' work performances. A cover letter and stamped return envelope accompanied each questionnaire. We reminded the respondents that participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential and be used exclusively for research purposes. Of the questionnaires that were returned, 497 pairs completed by teachers and supervisors were successfully matched, representing a response rate of 52.2 percent. The average age and school tenure of the teachers in the sample were 38 and 9.4 years, respectively. Approximately 20 percent of the teachers were male, and their average

education attainment approached the university level. The sample contained 34 supervisors, and the number of subordinates per supervisor ranged from 2 to 71 [ $M=14.62$ , standard deviation ( $SD$ )= $15.13$ ].

## Measures

### Feeling trusted by supervisors

As previously mentioned, feeling trusted or felt trust is defined as the perception that another party is voluntarily willing to assume risk along with an individual. This definition led us to adapt the trust scale from Gillespie's (2003) behavioral trust inventory by asking respondents whether their supervisors were willing to rely on them at work, and to share personal views and sensitive information. Several studies have indicated the good psychometric properties of this trust scale (Gillespie, 2003, 2012; Lam, Loi, & Leong, 2013; McEvily & Tortoriello, 2011).

Consistent with Gillespie's (2003) findings, we derived two factors, that is, reliance and disclosure, from a factor analysis [ $\chi^2(34)=541.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $SRMR=0.09$ ,  $NNFI=0.92$ ,  $CFI=0.94$ ]. According to Gillespie (2003), reliance refers to a trustor's dependence on a trustee's decisions and actions. One sample item included the extent to which supervisors were "willing to rely on [their employees'] work-related judgments." The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of this five-item scale was .92. The other dimension of Gillespie's (2003) trust scale deals with the disclosure of sensitive information. One sample item for disclosure included the extent to which supervisors were willing to "share his/her feelings" with their employees. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of this five-item scale was .93.

Reliance and disclosure represent two different facets of trusting behavior and may have individual effects on trusted employees. As reflected in the reliance items, supervisors with a high reliance on their subordinates were willing to allow them to make work-related decisions and willing to back them up in difficult situations. With little monitoring, supervisors could become the most vulnerable party in a reliance situation if the trusted subordinate turned out to be incapable and dishonest, as supervisors are accountable for their subordinates' poor work performance. Supervisors can also be caught in difficult and embarrassing situations if a trusted staff member fails to support them or conveys inaccurate information to others. In contrast, disclosure is usually associated with liking, high-quality relationships, and a wish to establish friendships (Collins & Miller, 1994). In vertical dyads, status differences may introduce another level of complexity to the effects of trust, as disclosing parties may select only status-relevant information to share (Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009). Because of the potential confounding effects, we measured the extent to which employees felt trusted in terms of these two factors and tested their effects separately.

### Task performance and organizational citizenship behavior

We asked the supervisors in our sample to provide ratings of teachers' task performances and their OCB toward individuals and organizations (OCBI and OCBO) by using Williams and Anderson's (1991) scales. Seven items were used to measure task performance (e.g., "adequately completes assigned duties"). Seven items were used to capture OCBI (e.g., "goes out of his or her way to help new employees"), and six items were used to measure OCBO (e.g., "attendance at work is above the norm"). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s for these three performance scales were .90, .93, and .73, respectively.

### Organization-based self-esteem

Organization-based self-esteem was assessed using the 10-item scale of Pierce et al. (1989) according to items such as "I am taken seriously in this school." A correlation analysis indicated that one item ("I am cooperative in this school") was not strongly related to the other OBSE items. Of the nine correlation coefficients for this item, three were insignificant and the corrected item-total correlation was the lowest (.22) among the 10 items, with the coefficients for the other items ranging from .40 to .73. Because being cooperative may not be an indicator of a strong self-concept in an independent profession such as teaching, we deleted this item. Another item ("I am trusted in this

school”) was also deleted because of its potential overlap with the felt trust construct; therefore, we formed an eight-item OBSE scale. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale was .83.

### Control variables

In the teacher questionnaire, we controlled for two individual-level variables that might have affected teachers’ work performance, including occupational tenure and teaching workload (number of classes taught per week). Whereas more experienced teachers are likely to be trusted more by their supervisors and to perform better, teachers with heavy workloads may lack the time and energy to perform both in-role and extra-role behavior. We also added a third group-level control variable (the number of teachers rated by supervisors) to control for the possibility that the teachers had little access to their supervisors in large work groups, which could have biased their perceptions of felt trust.

Finally, we included the quality of the leader–member exchange (LMX) relationship to control for the supervisor–subordinate relationship quality. The trust felt from one’s supervisor is related to but different from an LMX. Both constructs are about the supervisor–subordinate relationship, and trust often characterizes high-quality LMX relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2008). However, trust is a unilateral construct related to a supervisor’s willingness to assume risk in his or her relationship with a subordinate and may not always be reciprocated. The LMX, a bilateral construct, refers mainly to the quality of the relationship within the vertical dyad, and a willingness to assume risk is not a necessary condition. We implemented the scale used by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), and the Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .92.

## Results

The means, *SD*s, and inter-correlations of the level 1 variables in the study are listed in Table 1. As predicted, reliance and task performance ( $r_{\text{reliance}} = .22, p < .001$ ), OCBI ( $r_{\text{reliance}} = .16, p < .001$ ), and OCBO were positively related ( $r_{\text{reliance}} = .16, p < .001$ ), lending preliminary support to this study’s core thesis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variables	Mean	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Felt trust—reliance	3.52	0.60								
2 Felt trust—disclosure	2.82	0.87	.49***							
3 OBSE	3.34	0.54	.54***	.35***						
4 Task performance	4.01	0.55	.22***	.05	.24***					
5 OCBI	3.79	0.67	.16***	−.01	.13**	.75**				
6 OCBO	4.02	0.51	.16**	.02	.17**	.74**	.68**			
7 LMX	3.22	0.68	.59***	.62***	.41***	.06	.00	.04		
8 Number of classes	2.37	0.93	−.02	−.05	−.06	−.02	−.02	−.03	−.09*	
9 Occupational tenure	13.30	10.06	.18***	.07	.15**	.16***	.07	.09	.13**	.01

*N* = 497 for variables 1–7; *N* = 480 for variable 8; *N* = 481 for variable 9; two-tailed test.

OBSE, organization-based self-esteem; OCBI, organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals; OCBO, organizational citizenship behavior toward organizations; LMX, leader–member exchange.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Confirmatory factor analyses

We conducted two groups of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs). The first group consisted of the three performance variables: task performance, OCBI, and OCBO. The second group consisted of the four predictors: reliance, disclosure, LMX, and OBSE. The results are presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

Because the three performance variables were correlated, we conducted the CFAs to assess their discriminant validity. According to studies by Muthen (1994) and Dyer, Hanges, and Hall (2005), when data follow a hierarchical structure (e.g., individual and group level), a conventional CFA will lead to incorrect conclusions about the factor structures. Hence, as the three performance measures were nested within supervisors, we performed multilevel rather than conventional CFAs.

The preliminary step in a multilevel CFA is to assess whether there is sufficient between-group variation to warrant the use of a multilevel analysis. To determine this, we ran a null model in a hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) test to identify any significant between-group differences in the performance ratings given by the supervisors. The null model showed a systematic between-group variance in task performance [ $\chi^2(36) = 442.66; p < .001$ ], OCBI [ $\chi^2(36) = 713.15; p < .001$ ], and OCBO [ $\chi^2(36) = 954.45; p < .001$ ]. Dyer et al. (2005) suggested using ICCs to evaluate the extent of the systematic group-level variance. We computed the ICCs according to the procedure suggested by Hofmann (1997). The ICC(2) index indicated that 40, 54, and 64 percent of the variances in task performance, OCBI, and OCBO occurred between supervisors, respectively. The significant between-group variation indicated that a multilevel CFA was required.

We then performed a within-group CFA according to the procedure suggested by Dyer et al. (2005). We first subtracted the group means from the individual items to compute the deviation scores. A variance-covariance matrix was then derived from the deviation scores by multiplying each score by  $(N - 1)/(N - G)$ , where  $N$  is the number of

Table 2. Results of within-group confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement models: task performance, OCBI, OCBO.

Measurement models	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\Delta\chi^2$ ( $\Delta df$ )	SRMR	CFI	IFI
(1) 3-Factor model (task performance, OCBI, and OCBO)	1416.18** (167)		0.08	0.91	0.91
(2) 2-Factor model 1 (OCBI and OCBO combined into 1 factor)	2004.96** (169)	588.78** (2)	0.11	0.87	0.87
(3) 1-Factor model (all items combined into 1 factor)	5711.95** (171)	4295.77*** (4)	0.37	0.60	0.60

Note: In determining  $\Delta\chi^2$ , all of the alternative models were compared with the 3-factor model.

OCBI, organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals; OCBO, organizational citizenship behavior toward organizations; IFI, incremental fit index.

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement models: reliance, disclosure, OBSE, and LMX.

Measurement models	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\Delta\chi^2$ ( $\Delta df$ )	SRMR	CFI	IFI
(1) 4-Factor model (reliance, disclosure, OBSE, and LMX)	1413.22*** (269)		0.079	0.95	0.95
(2) 3-Factor model 1 (reliance and disclosure combined into 1 factor)	2760.59** (272)	1347.37** (3)	0.12	0.90	0.90
(3) 2-Factor model 2 (reliance and disclosure combined into 1 factor; LMX and OBSE combined into 1 factor)	4139.05** (274)	2725.83** (2)	0.13	0.84	0.84
(4) 1-Factor model (all items combined into 1 factor)	9025.6*** (276)	7612.38*** (7)	0.49	0.64	0.64

Note: In determining  $\Delta\chi^2$ , all of the alternative models were compared with the 4-factor model.

OBSE, organization-based self-esteem; LMX, leader-member exchange; IFI, incremental fit index.

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



observations and  $G$  is the number of groups. This variance–covariance matrix was then used to compute the fit indices of the measurement model. As Table 2 shows, the three-factor model (task performance, OCBI, and OCBO) had a model  $\chi^2$  of 1416.18 ( $p < .01$ ) with 167 degrees of freedom. The  $CFI$  was 0.91, the incremental fit index ( $IFI$ ) was 0.91, and the  $SRMR$  was 0.08, thus meeting Hu and Bentler's (1999) criteria for an adequate model fit. The fit indices of the within-group CFA suggested that the three-factor model provided a better fit than the one-factor model ( $IFI=0.60$ ,  $CFI=0.60$ , and  $SRMR=0.37$ ). We also found a significant chi-square difference [ $\chi^2(4)=4295.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ] when we compared the three-factor model with the one-factor model. In addition to the one-factor model, we also compared the three-factor model with an alternative two-factor model in which OCBI and OCBO were grouped into one factor, and found a significant chi-square difference [ $\chi^2(5)=588.78$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. The overall results of the within-group CFA suggested that the supervisors were able to distinguish the three types of employee performance.

We conducted another CFA among the reliance, disclosure, LMX, and OBSE predictors. To analyze whether the employees were able to distinguish these variables, we performed another CFA on the basis of the conventional approach (Table 3). Consistent with our expectations, a four-factor model showed a reasonably good fit [ $\chi^2(269)=1413.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $IFI=0.95$ ,  $CFI=0.95$ , and  $SRMR=0.079$ ] and had a significantly better fit [ $\chi^2(7)=7612.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ] than a single-factor model [ $\chi^2(276)=9025.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $IFI=0.64$ ,  $CFI=0.64$ , and  $SRMR=0.49$ ]. We also compared the four-factor model with two alternative models. The CFA showed that the four-factor model had a significantly better fit than the three- and two-factor models in terms of their chi-square differences [ $\chi^2(3)=1347.37$  and  $\chi^2(5)=2725.83$ , respectively;  $p < .01$ ], indicating that the teachers were able to discriminate among these constructs.

### *Hypotheses testing*

We used HLM to test our hypotheses. Because of the supervisors' possible effects on the teachers' performances, we accounted for the between-group differences in the dependent variables before testing our hypotheses. We followed Hofmann's (1997) suggestions on running random coefficient models. The results are presented in Table 4. Models 1, 5, and 9 included the control variables. Models 2, 5, and 8 tested the main effects of the felt trust variables. Models 3, 6, and 9 examined the mediating effect of OBSE on the relationship between felt trust and work performance. As expected, the teachers with more experience showed better task performances ( $\gamma=0.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Teaching workloads had a marginally negative relationship with task performance ( $\gamma=-.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that busy teachers face resource constraints when performing in-role behavior. Consistent with the literature on LMX (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012), the teachers that had high exchange relationships with their supervisors performed more OCBI ( $\gamma=0.11$ ,  $p < .01$ , in Table 2, model 5) and OCBO ( $\gamma=0.07$ ,  $p < .05$ , in Table 4, model 9).

Hypothesis 1 predicts that feeling trusted by supervisors is positively related to employees' OBSE. As expected, we found supporting results for Hypothesis 1 ( $\gamma_{\text{reliance}}=.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\gamma_{\text{disclosure}}=.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ) after controlling for teacher experience, workload, and LMX. We found that the felt-trust variables explained 16 percent of the level 1 variance of employees' OBSE beyond the control variables. Hence, Hypothesis 1 was strongly supported.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 examine the effects of employees' OBSE on their task performance and OCB. The HLM results were consistent with our expectations. As shown in Table 4 (models 3, 7, and 11), the employees' OBSE was positively related to their task performance ( $\gamma=0.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), their OCBI ( $\gamma=0.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and their OCBO ( $\gamma=0.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Employee OBSE explained 7, 4, and 3 percent of the individual-level variances of task performance, OCBI, and OCBO, respectively. Hence, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported.

Hypothesis 4 suggests that felt trust has a positive relationship with task performance and that such a relationship is mediated by OBSE. To test this hypothesis, we followed the procedures suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, we established significant relationships between the predictor and the outcome variables, and between the predictor and the mediator. If the results were significant, we then tested for the effect of the mediator on the outcome variables together with the predictor. The residual effect of the predictor should have been significantly smaller with

Table 4. HLM analysis of task performance, OCBI and OCBO.

	Task performance						OCBI						OCBO					
	Models																	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12						
<i>Control variables</i>																		
LMX (level 1)	.05 (.04)	.01 (.05)	-.02 (.05)	-.04 (.06)	.11** (.03)	.07 (.04)	.07* (.03)	.06 (.04)	.07* (.03)	.08* (.03)	.04 (.03)	.07* (.03)	.07* (.03)	.08* (.03)	.04 (.03)	.07* (.03)		
Number of classes (level 1)	-.08* (.04)	-.06 (.03)	-.07* (.03)	-.07* (.03)	-.07 (.04)	-.05 (.04)	-.07 (.05)	-.06 (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.03 (.03)	-.04 (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.03 (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.04 (.04)	-.03 (.03)		
Occupational tenure (level 1)	.01** (.00)	.00* (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.01 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)		
Number of teachers rated (level 2)	-.00 (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01* (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01* (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)		
<i>Hypothesized variables</i>																		
Felt trust—reliance		.17** (.05)		.12** (.04)		.14* (.05)		.10 (.06)		.05 (.03)		.10 (.06)		.05 (.03)		.02 (.03)		
Felt trust—disclosure		-.03 (.03)		-.04 (.03)		-.03 (.03)		-.03 (.03)		-.03 (.03)		-.03 (.03)		-.03 (.03)		-.04 (.03)		
Organization-based self-esteem			.20*** (.04)	.16*** (.04)			.13** (.05)	.08 (.06)			.10** (.03)	.09** (.03)			.10** (.03)	.09** (.03)		
$\Delta R^2$ compared with control model (due to individual effects)		.06	.07	.10		.04	.04	.09		.05	.03	.05		.03	.03	.05		

The gamma coefficients are reported. The standard errors are reported in parentheses. HLM, hierarchical linear modeling; OCBI, organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals; OCBO, organizational citizenship behavior toward organizations; LMX, leader-member exchange. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

the addition of the mediator. If all of these conditions were met, then the mediator was considered significant. In addition, because we measured felt trust according to reliance and disclosure (Gillespie, 2003), we examined their effects separately.

The directions of the predicting effects of reliance were as expected. The teachers' task performance was positively affected when they felt relied upon by their supervisors ( $\gamma_{\text{reliance}} = .17, p < .01$ , Table 4, model 2). As our early analysis showed, reliance was also significantly related to OBSE. These results met the precondition of Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure. After adding OBSE, the HLM results showed that the effects of reliance on task performance were reduced ( $\gamma = 0.12, p < .01$ , Table 4, model 4) and that OBSE was significant ( $\gamma = 0.16, p < .001$ , Table 4, model 4). According to Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure, this result indicated that the effect of reliance on task performance could be partially explained by the teachers' OBSE. A Sobel (1982) test also showed that OBSE significantly mediated the relationship between reliance and task performance ( $Z = 4.45, p < .001$ ). Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported in terms of reliance.

Hypothesis 5 suggests that OBSE mediates the relationship between feeling trusted by supervisors and the two forms of OCB (OCBI and OCBO). Following the first step of Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure, we found that reliance was positively related to OCBI ( $\gamma_{\text{reliance}} = .14, p < .05$ , Table 4, model 6). We then regressed OCBI by both reliance and OBSE. Our analyses indicated that neither reliance nor OBSE was significantly related to OCBI ( $\gamma = 0.10$  and  $0.08$ , respectively,  $p > .05$ , model 8). Although the OCBO predicting effect was positive as expected, the relationship level did not reach significance ( $\gamma_{\text{reliance}} = .05, p > .05$ , Table 4, model 10). These results suggest that OBSE does not mediate the relationships between reliance and the two forms of OCB (OCBI and OCBO). Moreover, the Sobel (1982) test results were unresponsive. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

After examining the effects of reliance, we examined the effects of disclosure. Contrary to our expectations, both the HLM and correlation analysis results indicated that disclosure was not related to task performance, OCBI, or OCBO, despite the strong correlation between reliance and disclosure ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ). Because disclosure had no main effect on the outcome variables, following Baron and Kenny's (1986) suggestion, we did not evaluate whether OBSE mediated these relationships.

## Discussion

Our study examined the effect of felt trust on employee work outcomes. Drawing on the self-evaluative perspective (Gecas, 1982; Korman, 1970), we theorized that felt trust provides social information to employees that is likely to be internalized and reflected in their self-esteem in the workplace. Consistency motives further drive trusted employees to enhance their task performances and OCB. The findings from our study of 497 teachers supported our core thesis by indicating that felt trust affects employee performance after controlling for LMX. When the teachers felt that their supervisors trusted them, their OBSE and work performances were positively affected. These effects were found only when the teachers perceived that their supervisors relied on them, but not when their supervisors disclosed sensitive information. Further, we found felt trust in terms of reliance to have a significant effect on task performance and OCBI, but not on OCBO.

Our findings contribute to the interpersonal trust literature in two ways. First, they add to the understanding of the influence of felt trust at the individual level. We proposed and confirmed that when employees feel relied upon by their supervisors, their work behavior is positively affected and the effect of felt reliance can be explained by changes in the trustees' self-perceptions. Second, we expanded the current understanding of trust effects beyond the traditional calculative and obligatory perspectives to encompass trust's proactive and self-evaluative effects. Previous research on felt trust has examined its normative or obligatory effects (Salamon & Robinson, 2008), and although studies on trust in leaders have shown trust to have a consistently strong influence on extra-role performance, trust has also been shown to have a relatively weak or inconsistent influence on task performance

(Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). One reason for this finding is that the social-exchange mechanisms between trusters and trustees work more effectively for discretionary behavior such as OCB, but not for task performance.

In addition to their contribution to the interpersonal trust literature, our findings contribute to the OBSE literature (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Although some empirical studies have found a positive relationship between trust and OBSE, a solid theoretical explanation has been lacking. By drawing on the self-evaluative perspective, we theorized and found that when employees felt trusted by their supervisors, their OBSE, an important part of their work self-concept, was positively affected. In addition, we found the mediating effect of OBSE on the felt trust–performance relationship to be significant for task performance only and not for discretionary OCB. This finding relates to the task-related nature of OBSE effects.

Although felt trust generally evokes a positive self-evaluation, a feeling of reliance from a supervisor in particular suggests to employees that the supervisor is willing to be more lax in monitoring their task performance. Such a willingness to be vulnerable also carries the expectation that employees will not exploit the supervisor's vulnerability (i.e., work less because the supervisor is not watching). Research that uses the appropriateness framework has already demonstrated that employees who are subject to such expectations from top management are more likely to act responsibly, ethically, and cooperatively (Salamon & Robinson, 2008).

Another intriguing result is that felt trust in terms of reliance has a strong influence on OCBI, indicating that when employees feel that their supervisor trusts them, they display more OCB toward their colleagues. However, this effect cannot be explained by self-esteem enhancement. One possible reason is that the nature of the supervisor–subordinate relationship is more task-oriented and instrumental, such that the social information transmitted by supervisory reliance raises the work-related part but not the relational part of one's self-concept. An alternative explanation is that OCB is driven more by reciprocity, obligation, and social exchange (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994), with self-concept not playing an important role. More research is required to directly compare the self-concept and social-exchange explanations of supervisory trust effects on employee behavior.

Another interesting finding is the differential effect of the two trust indicators, that is, reliance and disclosure. We found significant self-concept enhancement effects only when the respondents felt relied upon by their supervisors, but not when their supervisors disclosed sensitive information. These results indicate that not all kinds of trusting behavior enhance self-concepts. As social psychological research on interpersonal disclosure has suggested (Collins & Miller, 1994), disclosure effects are more relation-based than character-based (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Our results offer mixed results. On the positive side, disclosure and LMX were strongly correlated ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ); however, disclosure was not related to the two types of OCBs ( $r_{OCBI} = -.01, r_{OCBO} = .02, ns$ ). The HLM results also show a lack of significance in the relationship between felt disclosure and OCB. As proposed by Phillips et al. (2009), disclosure in vertical dyads may involve more than relationship building or social exchanges. As a type of trusting behavior, its effects require further examination in future research.

### *Limitations and future research*

Our study has several limitations. The data were cross-sectional, and we were therefore unable to determine any causality between felt trust, OBSE, and work performance. Reverse causality might have also been an issue, as the performance ratings given by supervisors were likely to affect either the feeling trusted by supervisors or the employees' OBSE. This concern was somewhat alleviated, as we obtained the felt-trust and work performance data from two different sources. Furthermore, according to the first part of the theoretical model, reverse causality is less likely, that is, when employees feel trusted by their supervisors, their OBSE is positively affected. Individuals experience OBSE mostly because the social messages they receive from meaningful and significant others indicate that they are worthy, capable, and competent (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). As such, the trust felt from a supervisor is more likely to be an antecedent of OBSE rather than vice versa. To overcome the limitations of cross-sectional studies, future research should therefore consider adopting a longitudinal design in which felt-trust data are collected before OBSE data, and OBSE data are collected before employee performance.

Another of this study's limitations is its generalizability. Our sample comprised teachers, a professional occupation that notably involves a degree of discretion in the workplace. Caution should therefore be exercised when generalizing the results to less autonomous occupations such as assembly-line work. Third, we focused on the effects of felt trust by supervisors on subordinate performance. Given that past studies (Lau & Lam, 2008; Salamon & Robinson, 2008) on felt trust have demonstrated its incremental effects on subordinate outcomes above and beyond that of trust, we assumed that these effects would continue, and thus we did not control for subordinates' trust in their supervisors. However, by controlling for LMX, we accounted for some of the mutual trust effects of the supervisor-subordinate relationship (Brower et al., 2009).

In this study, we proposed and confirmed that felt trust conveys a positive assessment by others, thereby enhancing OBSE. Given our findings, the logical next step is to examine conditions in which supervisors trust employees and employees experience felt trust from supervisors. For instance, research has shown trustworthiness to be an antecedent of trust, and that supervisors' assessments of their employees' ability, benevolence, and integrity are likely to affect their trust in those employees (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Mayer et al., 1995). Future research could also examine the boundary conditions of the main effects of felt trust. First, individual differences may limit the effect of self-esteem enhancement. Employees who have extremely low global self-esteem or who are highly skeptical may perceive those who are willing to be vulnerable as having a hidden agenda (Deci & Ryan, 1995). This may be especially true if the level of felt trust expressed diverges too much from the view of the self and does not evenly match the possible self (i.e., "Am I really that good?"; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Such felt trust may result in negative rather than positive work behavior. In addition, the research has also shown job autonomy to be another plausible boundary condition of trust. Too much trust may be detrimental to work performance when individuals have a high level of autonomy (Langfred, 2004). One explanation for this finding is that too much trust and too little monitoring encourage work performance to deteriorate because of social loafing (Karau & Williams, 1993). Team climate facilitation or social loafing inhibition is therefore interesting contexts for analyzing whether felt trust results in negative rather than positive work behavior. Second, as our findings indicate that trusters matter in self-concept evaluations, their trustworthiness and credibility are interesting issues. If subordinates feel trusted by a supervisor who is known to be self-interested or even unethical on occasion, then the differences between the truster's standards and the standards represented by the trust decision may be confusing and the self-concept effect less certain.

We speculate that the self-esteem mechanism works rather differently from the social-exchange mechanism where trust is concerned. Work attitudes or behavior arising from social-exchange motives are often externally driven, obligatory, or associated with expectations of future reward. In contrast, task meaning usually internally drives the same attitudes or behavior as the self-esteem mechanism, with no expectation of external reward. Further, because the social-exchange mechanism is people specific, it targets attitudes and behavior toward specific individuals such as supervisors. Self-concept targets are more diffuse by comparison. These differences imply that the self-concept effect may last longer than that of social exchange, as trustees lack the incentive to reciprocate when the specific target of the social exchange disappears. However, when trusted employees internalize the trust standards set for them, they may continue to act in a trustworthy manner even when the trusters are no longer in the workplace. Future research could compare the differential effects of trust on the basis of the social-exchange and self-esteem approaches. In addition to the social-exchange mechanism, future research could also consider comparing OBSE with the other known mediators of the trust-performance relationship (e.g., the ability to focus and the felt obligation) to better understand the unique contribution made by the self-evaluative perspective.

Future research could also explore the possibility that the effects of felt trust may be culturally bound. Self-construal theorists (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991) have suggested that individuals can be viewed as having both an independent self and an interdependent self. The former includes the abilities, beliefs, values, and characteristics that make an individual a unique and independent person. The latter addresses relationships, expectations, and roles when dealing with other individuals, groups, and larger organizations. Within the organizational behavior domain, these two concepts of the self are important in understanding the effects of leadership at different analytical levels (Lord et al., 1999). Cross, Gore, and Morris (2003) found that self-consistency, that is, the drive to remain consistent in all situations, is positively related to well-being, and that the relationship is stronger for individuals who display a stronger independent rather than interdependent self. A similar logic can be applied to the effects of felt trust. The self-concept mechanisms initiated by

felt trust may have a stronger effect on those with a strong independent self than on those with a strong interdependent self. For the latter, the obligatory forces resulting from role expectations may exert a stronger force.

### *Practical implications*

The research has shown that trust and felt trust are moderately correlated, and that trust may not always be felt. It is therefore important for trusters to ensure that the trusted party feels trusted. To achieve this, managers must concentrate on actions with high visibility (e.g., real delegation) to convey an explicit expression of trust and successfully relay the trust message. According to the literature on interpersonal trust, supervisors should also consider adopting behavior that involves information sharing, participation in decision making, and delegation of control (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). Our key finding on the importance of self-evaluation provides another important reason why such supervisory behavior can enhance employees' confidence, efficacy, and self-worth in performing their work roles.

In terms of organizations' top management, our findings reveal the benefits of involvement-oriented over control-oriented management philosophies (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). Consistent with the finding of Salamon and Robinson (2008) that collective felt trust by top management leads to better sales performance, our study shows that felt trust has positive benefits for organizations. It also shows that felt trust at the individual level leads to better task performance and OCB toward coworkers. These results suggest that an involvement-oriented management philosophy that makes trusting employees its central focus can introduce real benefits to an organization.

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