Swift trust formation in multi-national disaster project management teams

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A B S T R A C T

In recent years there has been growing interest in how project management theory can both inform and be informed by disaster response and recovery projects. Addressing the lack of empirical research into how trust forms within such projects, this exploratory study mobilises swift trust theory to investigate the process of trust formation within a multinational disaster project management team formed in response to tropical cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016. In-depth content analysis of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with disaster management team members, non-participant observation of the disaster project management teams during the disaster response and analysis of disaster management documentation appear to support the predictions of swift trust theory in relation to the importance of reputation, role and interdependence in building swift trust. However, theoretical predictions around the importance of categorical assumptions, confirmation of assumptions and the leadership role of the contractor did not appear to be supported by our data. It is concluded that while swift trust theory can potentially provide valuable practical and theoretical insights into trust formation in multinational disaster project management teams, it may need to be adapted to more accurately model trust formation in a disaster project management context.

1. Introduction

A disaster is defined as “a situation or event which overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to a national or international level for external assistance; an unforeseen and often sudden event that causes great damage, destruction and human suffering” (Guha-Sapir, Vos, Below and Ponselrrel 2011, p. 7). In recent years, predicted increases in the frequency, intensity and impact of disasters worldwide has attracted significant policy and research attention, although research into disaster response and recovery projects from a project management perspective remains limited (Padli, Habibulla & Baharom 2018, Chang-Richards, Wilkinson, Von Meding and Haigh 2017).

Disaster response and recovery projects present a unique project management challenge because such projects are characterised by an influx of many international organisations working together under extreme time and resource pressures (Chang-richards, Rapp, Wilkinson, Von meding, & Haigh, 2017). Organisations involved vary from disaster-to-disaster but typically include: foreign government disaster management teams and militaries; international non-government organisations (NGOs); aid agencies; private organisations; international financial institutions; and international media outlets. For example, within weeks of the 2004 Asian tsunami, Indonesia had approximately four hundred international NGOs involved (Perry, 2007). Although such help may be needed and requested by a developing nation, the lack of host nation capability to project manage a large influx of external personnel and organisations can undermine the benefits of the assistance provided or even make it counter-productive (Coppola, 2006). This presents a significant project management challenge in coordinating a highly diverse, fragmented and dynamic group of organisations and actors with different cultures, languages, systems and legal jurisdictions who are also likely to have had little prior experience of working together (Kapurc & Garayev, 2011).

This complex project management challenge has many poorly understood dimensions which are worthy of investigation. However, the aim of this paper is to address the specific and critical question of how trust forms within these multinational disaster project management teams. More specifically, it is to mobilise swift trust theory as a conceptual lens to reveal the factors which influence the formation of trust in such teams by analysing the multinational disaster project management team formed in response to tropical cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016. This research is important for a number of reasons. First, as Comfort (2005) notes, at the heart of any effective disaster response and recovery is the trust that develops between the organisations and people involved.
Indeed, Waugh (1999, p. 188) argues that the effectiveness of a disaster response “may depend more upon interpersonal skills, trust and trustworthiness...than technical skill and legal authority.” Second, the developing world includes a disproportionate number of disaster-prone countries (Sawada & Takasaki, 2017) which not only suffer a greater risk of mortality and human suffering when a disaster strikes (EM-DAT, 2015; Unep/Unisdr, 2013) but also a higher risk of paralysis to economic and governance systems (Sundermann, Schelske, & Hausmann, 2013, p. 14). Although many developing countries have strengthened their capacity to manage disaster response and recovery projects, many factors hinder their disaster management capabilities (Guhu - Sapir et al., 2016; Thomas & Keen, 2017). As Lin, Kelemen, and Kyomiya (2017) and Chang-richards et al. (2017) argue, further research is needed to explore how the field of project management can contribute to the advancement of theory and practice in this important and under-researched area.

2. Managing trust in disaster response and recovery projects

In recent years there has been growing interest in how to manage disaster response and recovery projects in a number of fields including: project management (Chang-richards et al., 2017; Steinfurt, 2010); public management (Sawada 2013); construction management (Chang et al., 2012; Jamshed et al., 2018); business continuity and emergency management (Sheth 2008); and economics and finance (Takshai, Ruhikalroosi., & Absamah, 2017). However, as Lin et al. (2017) note, the potential value of a project management lens in a disaster management response and recovery context has been relatively under-researched. According to Chang-richards et al. (2017), many questions remain about the adequacy of traditional project management methodologies and tools in addressing the high levels of uncertainty and dynamism of such projects and in negotiating the many different sectoral interests represented. As Wildman et al. (2012) state, a disaster response and recovery team is a temporary group of people and organisations tasked with coordinating the response, reconstruction and recovery effort. According to Perry (2003) this requires interdependence and communication between multiple levels of government, political leaders, response agencies such as fire, police, and ambulance services, primary industries and critical infrastructure (such as water and energy), the general public; and external sources of assistance, such as international governments and NGOs. These cross-sectoral actors are assembled in a central location (typically called the Emergency Operations Centre - EOC) for a defined period of time by invitation of a national host government which coordinates their responses through a nominated EOC leader/commander (Anglin, 2011; Perry, 2003). These organisations and their representatives are unlikely to have worked together before (Curnin & Owen, 2013), although typically the labour pools and networks from which the disaster management team are drawn are small and overlapping. According to Anglin (2011), depending on the type and scale of disaster, EOC operations can last a few months or several years with non-routine operational challenges arising from the constantly changing situation on the ground. Ultimately, the goal of the EOC is to successfully project manage the response to a disaster in accordance with clear objectives set out in national disaster management plans.

Chang-richards et al. (2017) argue that there is a particular need to better understand the critical project management skills required to effectively manage such teams and as Steinfurt (2017) points out, the ‘one-size fits all’ approach promoted by much project management literature appears inadequate to respond to the many different types of disasters that can eventuate. Nevertheless, in the limited project management research which has been published on the topic of disaster management a number of prominent themes have been problematised as being critical to the effectiveness of post disaster response and recovery. For example, Saduj, Trigunarsyah, and Coffey (2017) point to the critical need to involve communities in decision-making, identifying five common barriers: lack of community capacity; gender issues; lack of professional competence in NGOs; government policies and practices; and lack of adequate security. Walker, Vries, and Nilakant (2017) argue that managing legitimacy perceptions among the multiple stakeholders involved is a core but little-recognised critical success factor. Gacasan and Wiggins (2017) found that the development of shared awareness and understanding (sensemaking) is a critical skill in recovery project management and Levie, Bruke, and Lannon (2017) point to the importance of project governance in disaster relief and project management. Lin et al. (2017) have argued for the importance of ‘active leadership’ in the context of community led recovery projects and for the need to train project managers in both technical and soft leadership skills, while Vahanvati and Mulligan (2017) found that the best long-term post disaster recovery project outcomes were achieved when the many organisations involved adopted an ‘agile’ approach to project planning and implementation, when they allocated ample time for gaining and maintaining community trust, and when they continued community capacity building beyond the completion of the reconstruction work.

Trust has also emerged as an important factor in disaster recovery project management success. For example, Vahanvati and Mulligan’s (2017) and Kalkman and Waard (2017) found that trust and control were core mutually reinforcing factors for building confidence among collaboration partners in disaster response and recovery teams. Kalkman and Waard (2017) found that in the complex, uncertain and ambiguous inter-organisational dynamics associated with post disaster recovery projects, deliberate action needs to be taken to purposefully build and balance trust and control in inter-organisational relationships to reach shared goals and build network confidence and resilience. A number of other researchers in the field of disaster management have also identified trust as a critical success factor (see for example Conzo, 2014; Yoder-bontager, 2014).

In the context of inter-organisational relationships, Hosmer (1995, p. 399) defined trust as “the expectation of a similar behaviour that recognises and protects the interests of other people in order to increase willing cooperation and expand ultimate benefits within a joint endeavour or economic exchange.” In the context of project management, trust has been shown to play an important role in project success as a critical mechanism to mitigate risk, especially in uncertain contexts (Ceric, 2016) and as a facilitator of positive collaborative relationships among project stakeholders including effective communication, project team dynamics, top management support, and coordination across project stakeholders such as contractors, owners, and suppliers (Pinto, Dennis, Slevin, & English, 2009, Diallo and Thuillier 2005). Recently, Bond-Barnard, Fletcher, and Steyn (2018, p. 449) found that the level of trust in a project is influenced by: “the expectations that the project team have of each other; the knowledge exchange that takes place between them; and the degree of trust that is imported from other familiar settings (imported trust”).

The literature on trust shows that three types of trust can develop between people in organisational settings: deterrence-based trust; situational-based trust; and rule-based trust. ‘Deterrence-based’ trust is built upon legal contracts and exists because sanctions for breaches of trust exceed any potential benefits from opportunistic behaviour (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 398). ‘Situational-based’ is context dependent and irrespective of one’s beliefs about the attributes of the other party in a relationship (Mcknight & Chervany, 1996, p. 38). ‘Rule-based’ trust is based on a trustor’s knowledge of how the trustee fits within an organisation (Kramer & Lewicki, 2010). However, the majority of this research has been conducted in the context of permanent business organisations and long-term relationships rather than the spontaneous short-term relationships found within temporary project organisational settings such as multinational disaster management teams. As Militello, Peterson, Bowman and Wean (2007, p. 25) note, such teams are temporary arrangements where individuals and organisations (government, business, not-for-profit, community) come together for a short period of time (often for the first time) and then disband, to reform again in another form and in another disaster context. In such an environment, where there is little time, precedent or contractual basis for trust to form, Meyerson, Weick and Kramer’s (1996) swift trust theory potentially offers an alternative, and potentially valuable conceptual framework, for explaining how trust
forms. According to Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) trust is not time-dependent and groups that are short lived which do not have the time to develop traditional forms of trust building, are still able to experience the benefits of trust through the development of what they termed swift trust. Meyerson et al. (1996: 167) defined swift trust as ‘a unique form of collective perception and relating that is capable of managing issues of vulnerability, uncertainty, risk, and expectations’. They argued that in temporary organisational settings where people do not have any prior relationship, individuals have to initially assume trust, interact as if trust were present and then later verify and adjust their trust beliefs in response to accumulating evidence about six trust factors, which represented our analytical framework for this research (Meyerson et al., 1996).

1. Reputation – Given the limited opportunities to demonstrate competency in temporary teams, people depend heavily on reputation to build trust. Reputation is the beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone and can be based around individual or organisational identities and attributes.

2. Role – Swift trust develops faster in temporary systems when actors behave in accordance with clear roles.

3. Categorical assumptions - In temporary systems actors tend to rely more on categorical assumptions (stereotypes and pre-conceived opinions) as opposed to evidence-based information when determining who to trust.

4. Confirmation of assumptions – An actor in a temporary system will want to collect evidence to confirm the categorical assumptions they have made about their colleagues when deciding whether to continue trusting them.

5. Interdependence – When there is a high level of interdependence between the members of the temporary system relying on categorical assumptions becomes risky.

6. A contractor - Swift trust in temporary systems is not only dependent on interpersonal relationships but on the skills of the ‘contractor’ or leader who brings the members of the system together.

Despite its age, and while there is still debate about when swift trust transitions into normal trust and whether it works in all contexts (see for example Zolin, 2002 critique of swift trust in stability, security, transition and reconstruction operations), Meyerson et al.’s (1996) swift trust theory remains the only robust theory of trust formation in temporary teams and it has been mobilized successfully by other researchers in a range of temporary group settings such as in military, virtual and swift starting action teams (Wildman, 2012, Crisp and Jarvenpaa 2013). However, its use in a disaster project management context is relatively novel, although Majchrzak and Jarvenpaa (2007) did find that trust in emergent groups responding to disasters took the form of swift trust developed through task-based action in the presence of a shared fate or super-ordinate goal. In response to the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster, Beck and Plowman’s (2014) analysis also recognised the importance of swift trust formation in allowing individuals from different agencies, without a designated leader or existing structure, to quickly collaborate. Curnin, Owen, Paton, Trist, and Parsons (2015) used swift trust theory to reveal the importance of role clarity in facilitating multi-agency coordination efforts in an emergency management setting. More recently, Qing, Goh, and De souza (2018) found that swift trust can lead to greater openness in information sharing for coordination in humanitarian logistics operations.

Based on the above critique, the following section describes the methodology and method we employed to mobilise swift trust theory, as a conceptual lens to reveal the factors which influence the formation of trust within multinational disaster project management teams by analysing the response to tropical cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016.

3. Methodology and method

Ontologically our research was guided by a social constructivist lens (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Epistemologically, this meant that data about trust formation within an EOC was collected using an inductive interpretivist approach which consisted of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, in close interaction with our respondents in the natural setting of an EOC (David & Sutton, 2011). Within this context, an in-depth case study approach was adopted. As Noor (2008, p. 1603) states, case studies “enable the researcher to gain an holistic view of a certain phenomenon…capturing the emergent and immanent properties of life in organisations and the ebb and flow of organisational activity, especially where it is changing very fast.” We adopted a single case study approach because of the depth of insight it afforded, allowing complex social phenomenon like trust formation to be deeply investigated in its specific cultural, social, and natural context (Yin, 2017).

3.1. Case study description

On the 20th February 2016, a devastating category 5 cyclone, Tropical Cyclone (TC) Winston, struck the Republic of Fiji (Fiji). TC Winston was recorded as one of the most severe cyclones ever to hit the South Pacific with an estimated 350,000 people (approximately 40% of the population) being affected, 31,000 houses damaged or destroyed and approximately US$1.4 billion damage (about 32% of Fiji’s GDP). TC Winston killed 44 people and up to 56,000 evacuees required the use of emergency shelters. This natural disaster met all the selection criteria required to test our hypothesis that swift trust theory can be used to describe the way that swift trust develops within multinational disaster management teams. First, Fiji had a permanent EOC which acted as the centre for coordination for all pre and post natural disaster related matters. Second, the Fijian Government requested international assistance, resulting in international personnel being sent from multiple countries to aid the response and recovery, including Australia, New Zealand and France. Many international agencies also flew-in to aid the response and recovery, and those already in Fiji sent additional staff to support the response effort. Examples of these agencies include: UNOCHA, UN Women, Red Cross, World Health Organisation (WHO), World Food Programme (WFP), and UNICEF.

3.2. Data collection

Data was collected over a period of five weeks while one of the authors was stationed in the EOC office. This commenced as soon as possible after the national emergency was formally declared and continuing until the declared national state of emergency was lifted and the EOC was starting to hand over their work to the rest of the government and heading back to its normal staffing load. Data was collected using multiple data collection techniques to triangulate and validate the results. These methods included: non-participant observation of the EOC during the response period, documentary analysis of communications, informal conversations with EOC personnel and semi-structured interviews with EOC members. The period over which data was collected went back to the inception of the EOC and our multi-method approach was designed to provide both emic (from the perspective of the subject) and etic (from the perspective of the observer) data. In particular, being on the ground in the EOC office as a non-participant observer, was essential to develop trust between the researcher and respondents in what was a highly pressured, complex and dynamic research setting and to see issues from the perspective of respondents, rather than just the external perspectives of the researchers. Being based in the field was also essential to enable the researcher to develop a deep understanding of the disaster and the political, social, economic and cultural context in which the response was being managed. Studying the disaster response from the outside and from another country would have been ineffective and also disrespectful to local Fijian cultural values. Being at a distance would not have enabled us to discover and learn about the impact of Fijian culture on trust formation. Semi-structured interviews with EOC members were undertaken in person or by telephone and typically lasted 60–90 min. They were
recorded with participants' permission and then transcribed with all participant interview and non-participant observation notes being anonymised. Informed by our research questions and theoretical framework as described above, the semi-structured interviews were designed to investigate the factors which influenced trust formation for each person in the sample – mobilising the six swift trust theory criteria listed above. The interviews specifically asked each respondent:

1. The importance and role that trust played in the relationships with other members of the disaster response and recovery team?
2. Whether prior reputation was important in trusting someone?
3. How much they relied on others performing their role in trust formation?
4. Whether they made categorical assumptions in deciding whether to trust someone or not?
5. Did they seek to validate these assumptions and if so how?
6. What impact did interdependence have on trust formation?
7. How influential was the Project Manager (contractor) in facilitating trust formation?

As discussed above, swift trust requires each member of the temporary project system to be working together since a task's inception. For this reason, only those involved in the EOC since the disaster was formally declared by the Fijian Government were included in the sample for interview. This meant that any supporting roles, such as executive administrators, assistants, and office clerks were excluded which resulted in a purposive sample of 18 respondents linked by the same objective, the same timing and the same contractor leadership; which was important in the application of swift trust theory. See Table 1 for the detailed interview sample structure.

The interviews were semi-structured for a number of important reasons. First, given the lack of prior empirical research in this area, our work was essentially exploratory. Second, our respondents would not be familiar with the theoretical constructs we were investigating. So rather than asking our respondents questions about the importance of these factors, we wanted our respondents to give us the benefit of their experience in narrating the roles and relationships that their experience had taught them were linked to trust formation in the case study project. Third, semi-structured interviews allowed our interviewees the freedom to express their views in their own terms and where relevant to ask questions of the interviewer (Taylor, Bogdan, & Devault, 2015). This allowed the co-production of narratives through a dialogic exchange between interviewer and participant, providing us with powerful stories about their interactions, relationships and experiences during the project, both good and bad. As Keene, Keating, and Ahonen (2016) shows, semi-structured interviews which enable respondents the flexibility to move outside narrow question frames and tell their stories are a powerful way for researchers and respondents to collectively make sense of complex interconnected concepts such as trust with multiple actors, which can often be difficult to describe through any other means.

In addition to the interviews, documentary data about EOC relationships were collected from documents such as the Fiji National Disaster Management Plan, EOC staff movement board, EOC and Government ‘vision and values’ signage on the walls of the EOC (one of the EOC stated values was ‘trust’) and other signs, notes and posters in the EOC headquarters (for example, relating to the stealing of goods from the

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<th>Resp</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Permanent or surge staff</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Team during operation</th>
<th>Team prior to operation</th>
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<td>EOC 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Surge</td>
<td>Team Leader (Current Operations) &amp; Assistant to the Director</td>
<td>Current Operations/National Emergency Operations Centre</td>
<td>Secretary of the Pacific Community</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Fijian</td>
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<td>GIS/Information Management Specialist</td>
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EOC). Respondents were also asked to complete a Network Mapping Worksheet to identify their role in the EOC, who they communicated with, how often and the length of any prior relationship. Finally, data was also collected continuously using non-participant observation by being stationed in the EOC during the disaster response period to validate answers respondents provided during the interviews, and to understand how the respondents’ behaviour, as well as the physical and emotional context, could influence the formation of swift trust. All relevant observations and informal conversations were recorded as field notes, including notes on reflexivity; which is important in all interpretivist research since it involves the researcher acknowledging how their presence in the research setting may have influenced the data collection process (Creswell, 2012).

3.3. Phase 3 – data analysis

In support of Kendall and Kendall (2012), the value of qualitative data collected through our semi-structured interviews, when combined with insights from other sources of data (observational, documentary) was that they produced rich and insightful narratives into organisational processes which included multiple parties, timelines, sequences of events, plots, goals, challenges, setbacks, lessons, characters and ultimately insights into trust formation within the EOC project management team. Each of these elements were evident in the data we collected which were transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis which involved us ‘structuring’ the narratives by inductively pinpointing, examining, and recording common themes within the data. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) and Guest et al. (2012) our inductive thematic analysis involved several stages starting with: ‘immersion’ in the data (repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to obtain a high level of familiarity with the data); categorisation/coding (organising and generating an initial list of items/codes from the data-set that have a reoccurring pattern as it relates to the research questions); searching for themes (examining how codes combine to form over-reaching themes which are phrases or sentences that identifies what the data means in relation to the research questions); refining themes (continuing to search for data that supported or refuted proposed themes and connections between overlapping themes). In accordance with good qualitative research practice, this was done by a team of researchers which comprised of an ‘insider’ who collected the data and an ‘outsider’ who remained independent from the project. This insider/outsider approach is widely used in psychology and social sciences research to provide different perspectives on data (see for example Hayfield and Huxley 2015). Data was analysed by both researchers and instances of disagreement were resolved through discussion, a process which ensured high inter-rater agreement and a high level of ‘fit’ with the data we collected and the theoretical constructs that informed our research questions.

In line with the traditions of thematic research we present our analysis below in narrative form supported by selected quotes. Clearly, it is not possible to recount everything respondents said, so our results use selected representative quotes from the main themes emerging from the data. We acknowledge that in the interpretative tradition, it is important to recognise that in the construction of narrative accounts the researcher inevitably plays a role in what is presented. However, as described above, the comparative process of cross checking between insider and outsider, and the employment of theoretical constructs to guide analysis, helped in our reflexivity and in minimising any potential bias in this process. Furthermore, in presenting our results we have sought to present the exact words used by our respondents without our interpretation so that readers can judge for themselves that our interpretation is correct.

4. Results

To explore the hypothesis that the trust that develops between disaster project management personnel is in accordance with swift trust theory, the results relating to Meyerson et al. (1996) swift trust criteria are discussed below.

4.1. Swift trust criterion #1 - reputation

Respondents identified both ‘professional reputation’ and ‘personal reputation’ as important factors in trust formation and indicated that trust can be impacted by how reputations are perceived from the perspectives of both the trustee and the trustor.

“For all of us in that room, we have reputations that we have to protect; especially for this work.” (EOC 11)

“[I consider my reputation] because the 30 days, you’re going to be working together…[and] I’ll have to work with [my colleagues] eventually and I would rely on them [in the future].” (EOC 12)

“I have to get the background of the person from a previous colleague who they have worked together. So it can give me an indication that he can do the job…” (EOC 15)

The importance of reputation was strongly linked by our respondents to the lack of previous relationships within the EOC team to base judgements of trust on and the likelihood they and the likelihood that their organisations would work together again in the future on another disaster. While the data indicated that the main approach to trust was ‘situation-based’, it also showed that concern for reputation within the EOC also had a ‘rules-based’ dimension linked to the organisations they represented. In particular, there was a tendency for people from government to inherently trust each other based on commonly perceived values of public service interests.

“There is just this thing about the civil service where you just trust the other public servant. I don’t know how to explain it. There is this general trust in the civil service” (EOC 1)

“…people who work in government, they are binded by what is called the ethics code of conduct and code of ethics; trust is one of them.” (EOC 7)

Notably, there was only one reference to ‘deterrence-based’ trust, and our data strongly indicated that a psychological contract revolving around strong interpersonal ‘expectations’ of trusting behaviour was the main driver of trust formation within the disaster project management team, rather than legal contracts and broader institutional drivers.

“…to me [trusting], as long as he’s been given the job, I expect him to deliver.” (EOC 17)

“I was very conscious from the word ‘go’ that I had to earn that trust and…If they trusted me with something, if they said, ‘we don’t want you to share this’, then I had to respect that.” (EOC 13)

4.2. Swift trust criterion #2 – role

Our results indicate that under the pressures of a disaster response, actors’ abilities to perform their roles within the disaster response team and understand what other’s roles were, played an important part in trust formation, rather than other criteria such as personality characteristics.

“…because of the pressures of the work, we need to trust them that they can get the job done.” (EOC 4)

“…there are a few who are just new to the system, to what is happening here…we need everybody here to understand what everybody’s doing.” (EOC 9)

Notably, role-based interactions extended beyond the immediate time-limited boundaries of the EOC. For example, several respondents had an online chat group to enable them to continue working on the response outside formal work hours.
“…we formed a Viba chat group. We called it ‘Liaison Officer’ chat group. And that was even when we were at home and we needed information from each other.” (EOC 11)

The overwhelming reliance on role-based trust was described as being dictated by the task-intensity of the response and by a high level of team interdependency and reciprocity which existed within the EOC team. Without any time to question others’ competency, individuals had to rely on colleagues to do their job and had to trust others to step-in and cover their roles when the task demands for one EOC team member became overwhelming – as they frequently did.

"I had to trust a lot, ‘If I give you this information, do you think you could give me something’…So the first time I met [them], I don’t think I really actually talked to [EOC 14], it was a ‘hi bye’ sort of thing… So…we had to have that [trust].” (EOC 11)

“I wouldn’t really have to know [my colleagues]…I just had to trust my colleagues to do their part and I had to focus on mine…” (EOC 1)

Since the majority of respondents based their trust on role performance rather than personality, role clarity appeared to be an important mediator for trust formation, especially early on, and particularly due to the dynamic nature of disaster responses and teams and the incorporation of external surge staff into the disaster management team.

“…you had people from all agencies, all different organisations. It was important for the team from [the EOC] to understand why we were all here, which was something that really should have happened before the whole operation.” (EOC 11)

Judgements around role clarity were problematic and often seen as counter-productive because members of the EOC were expected to multitask when workloads were intense.

“Everyone had like six hats, everyone was all over the place here.” (EOC 10)

“…There were times when we had to do double jobs, sometimes triple jobs… I just had to absorb some other functions temporarily, so the work could go on.” (EOC 1)

4.3. Swift trust criterion #3 – categorical assumptions

When respondents were asked to describe the criteria used when deciding to trust someone, the majority were non-categorical and evidence-based (mainly around competency, quality of work, and delivering on time), especially as the EOC matured and evidence became available upon which to base trust judgements.

“…part of [trust] would have been the quality of the work they were producing…You could tell when someone’s made an effort.” (EOC 14)

"The way they speak, the way they behave, the way they, you know, converse with you. From there I can know a person whom I can trust…”” (EOC 15)

Notably while role competency was widely considered important, ‘local’ EOC members’ trust in international personnel was largely based on non-categorical criteria which were values-based rather than competency-based. Important values which emerged in our data included: work ethics, morals, willingness to help and work across boundaries, friendliness, openness and honesty, team commitment, sensitivity to the local context, humility and respect for local staff, customs, systems and institutions.

“Humility in integrating into a locally led national response. …I expect them to put their modus operandi at the door and come in and work into the system…” (EOC 16)

“[International colleagues]…should be able to ah, listen…. Respect, you know, they should respect the organisation and the director and what their wishes are. And just work closely with ah, with the team.” (EOC 7)

"…a number of international people I have worked with, they come off as ‘I know better than you’. But you don’t know the environment that I work in. I mean, you don’t know what happens with the Indigenous people, I know it better.” (EOC 8)

“[Internationals should]…come in and try and understand how we work. You know, don’t try and force themselves in because they think they are international, they would know better. But because, every country is different and how we run things are different. So maybe come and understand how systems, how things work.” (EOC 12)

For local EOC members, trust was also based on culturally specific categorical assumptions of stereotype relationships between different clans within Fijian society.

“Ah yeh…myself and the person I am calling Kai…We are from the same province. So in that way, we have that natural bond, natural trust.” (EOC 4)

“if you’re a…Kai, the level of trust is a lot higher than if you’re a Tau. Um, or if you’re a Mataqali, there’s another level of trust there…” (EOC 16)

4.4. Swift trust criterion #4 – confirmation of assumptions

We did not find much evidence that EOC members sought to validate their trusting criteria. However, there was some evidence of validating behaviour in the early stages of the disaster response.

“You task people differently. If you know someone is a flake, you’ll give them something simple to do and expect that it will probably not happen …” (EOC 2)

“You don’t have to tell them but…you can start asking questions…not showing them that you don’t trust them, but with some questions… [then] you can slowly give responsibilities, not bigger ones, but test with some [smaller tasks].” (EOC 9)

Interestingly, in contrast to swift trust theory, trust was not necessarily damaged when people failed to act in accordance with categorical expectations, largely because of the pressures associated with responding to a disaster and the lack of clarity and flexibility which often surrounded people’s roles. This meant that they could not easily rely on confirmatory evidence as a basis for trust formation. These results suggest that swift trust theory may underplay the importance of tolerance within disaster project management teams – at least towards the way that people perform their roles. For example, tolerance towards the wrong values was not evident.

"Sometimes we needed to adapt to special behaviours [by our colleagues] because there was a lot of pressure and tension.” (EOC 4)

“…rather than adapt to unexpected behaviour, as in the negative, the adaptation was more to the positive, you know, like… People were willing to do the long hours, willing to eat tea and biscuit.” (EOC 16)

4.5. Swift trust criterion #5 – interdependence

The network mapping data produced a social network which showed that the EOC had a dense and highly interdependent structure. This structure was widely regarded as an important driver of trust within the EOC.
"I trust you because at the end of the day, if you don’t deliver, I get affected as well." (EOC 16)

"...[any problem would affect] the wider team in the [EOC]... Because all things are related to each other." (EOC 6)

When levels of perceived interdependence for each actor were plotted against the actual patterns of communication in the EOC network, the data showed that those who had a higher level of perceived interdependence also tended to have more connections with others in the EOC network. In other words, that perceived interdependence moved EOC members to form stronger relationships providing the basis for evidence-based relationships.

4.6. Swift trust criterion #6 – the contractor

Data relating to the role of the Project Director (as the contractor) in trust formation was inconclusive. Notably, the eight respondents who saw the Director’s role as important were all locals, suggesting that the application of swift trust theory may need to be qualified in the context of international teams.

"...because if the director trust them, so I have no reason not to trust them in work relations." (EOC 7)

"... knowing that they’re there with his [the Director's] endorsement I think basically allowed that trust factor to be at the start of the conversation rather than being something that you worked towards." (EOC 14)

It is unclear why international EOC members didn’t consider the role of the contractor as important to trust formation but this may be related to the relatively nomadic nature of their jobs compared to local members and the relative lack of cultural connection and prior relationship with the contractor, compared to local team members.

5. Discussion

5.1. General findings

Our results point to the importance of trust in inter-organizational relations (Pinto et al., 2009) and provide further evidence to support Ceric’s (2016) assertion that trust acts as an important risk management mechanism in projects – especially when there is a high degree of independence and uncertainty (see discussion below). In the context of disaster response and recovery projects, trust appears to do this by compensating for the limitations of formal controls in highly uncertain, dynamic situations where new cross-sector inter-organizational relationships exist. Second, like Pinto et al. (2009) our findings indicate that trust formation is context-dependent and is often rooted in different cultural contexts (both organizational and national). Third, our results provide further evidence to support Kalkman and Waard (2017) research, which showed that trust development is an evolving process as organisations from different sectors work around the restrictive formal controls and contracts which replace trust in the early stages of a disaster response, when there are often no a-priori relationships to depend on. Our research also supports their findings that inter-personal and inter-organizational trust are distinct but related in that the activities of individual representatives significantly affect organizational relationships. However, our research also shows that the relationship is reciprocal in that organisational relationships also affect inter-personal relationships and that this has an important sectoral dimension in that organisations from similar sectors (government for example) are likely to trust each other more than those from different sectors (NGOs and government for example). Our research shows that one of the unique features of disaster response and recovery projects, compared to other types of projects, is their cross-sector nature which introduces an extra cultural and institutional dimension to inter-organizational dynamics. This suggests that an important avenue for future research in disaster response and recovery project management may be the application of theories of cross-sector collaboration (De montigny, Desjardins, & Bouchard, 2017) and New Institutionalism (March & Olsen, 2011).

5.2. Swift trust findings

The main contribution of this research is in showing that swift trust theory is a valuable conceptual representation of how trust forms in disaster response and recovery projects. This theory has provided new insights into the processes and factors that determine how trust forms in such projects. For example, in terms of reputation’s importance in swift trust formation (criterion #1), our results are consistent with swift trust theory and support Meyerson et al. (1996) proposition that reputation is a key criterion in trust formation – especially given the lack of previous experience and information available to EOC actors, and the likelihood of reputations being transferred to other future EOC contexts. However, the results add a more nuanced insight into the role of reputation in trust formation by differentiating between ‘professional reputation’ and ‘personal reputation’ and highlight the importance of strong interpersonal ‘expectations’ driving trusting behaviour rather than broader institutional drivers such as organisational codes of practices, legal controls, and statements of values. Furthermore, while results confirm Meyerson et al. (1996) proposition that reputation is a key criterion in trust formation, they add a second dimension to this proposition by showing that trust can be impacted by how reputations are perceived from the perspectives of both the trustee and the trustor. Our findings around the importance of ’situational based’ trust rather than ‘deterrence-based’ trust and ‘rule-based’ trust indicate that sanctions for untrustworthy behaviour may not be formalised. Instead, behavioural control in such systems seems to be achieved through informal sanctions such as a member being excluded from the temporary system and gaining a reputation for being untrustworthy. These results extend the work of Alvinius, Danielsson, and Larsson (2010) by showing that reputational trust has an institutional dimension (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004) and also add to swift trust theory by highlighting the importance of international organisations adherence to the culture, values and governance of the nation they are deployed to.

In terms of role (criterion #2), our results support swift trust theory’s prediction that role behaviour is important to trust development because it substitutes for more specific trusting evidence about a colleague which may be unavailable due to the absence of prior relationships. However, low role clarity appeared to be accepted as an unavoidable and indeed necessary consequence of disaster management team temporality and of the need for team members to multitask when workloads become unbearable and to adapt to the constantly changing role demands of the disaster situation. Our findings therefore seem to qualify those of Curnin et al. (2015) who found that role clarity acts as an enabler of collaborative multiagency working practices among organisations in an emergency management setting. While we do not dispute the importance of role clarity our findings tend to support Turoff, Chumer, De walle, and Yao (2004, p. 15) who state, “in a crisis it is never certain who will take on which role or which combination of roles. It is expected that people will be trained to be qualified in a number of different roles.” Similarly, these results support Majchrzak et al. (2007) study of swift trust in emergent search-and-rescue projects, where trust was reported to develop through getting things done rather than strict adherence to designated roles. Similarly, we found that colleagues taking on additional tasks outside of their assigned role did not hinder trust formation. Except for those in positions of leadership, the respective importance assigned to knowing a colleague’s role, and them adhering to that role, appears to be less than what Meyerson et al. (1996) and swift trust theory would predict. Furthermore, our results qualify those of Curnin et al. (2015, 6) who espoused, “the importance of role clarity in the rapid formation of temporary organisations.” Importantly, they also highlight the importance of the ‘informal organisation’, as considered in theories of new
institutionalism (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004) by supporting the research of Lalonde (2004), who found that resourcefulness, flexibility and autonomy are critical attributes for actors operating in a disaster management context.

In terms of categorical assumptions (criterion #3), our findings are not consistent with swift trust theory in that actors largely based their trust on evidence of competency rather than on categorical assumptions (apart from between local EOC and international team members where categorical assumptions relating to different cultural groups in Fijian society did seem to play an important trust formation role). While we recognise that we were not there at the very start of the disaster response, our findings support broader organisational theory, which argues that trust is mainly influenced by three main criteria: competency (ability), integrity (openness and honesty), and benevolence (kindness, helping, sharing) (Saunders, Dietz, & Thornhill, 2014). This is somewhat surprising given that main stream organisational trust research has largely been based in permanent systems, suggesting that swift trust theory may overstate the influence of categorical assumptions in role formation in temporary systems. Particularly, the formation of trust for local actors towards international actors relies on values-based evidence (sensitivity to culture, humility, openness etc) and the categorical assumption of cultural relationships. Our findings therefore tend to support research by MacRitchie (2011) which argues that trust is contextual and situationally specific and is influenced by the wider context and social similarities within disaster management teams. Finally, our results relating to the distrust between local and international teams supports the findings of Zolin (2002): 5) who argues that “international temporary teams are not always so successful in developing swift trust, due to...differences in culture”. Our results support Hilhorst (2005, p. 359) who argued that “...the need [for international personnel] to be accountable to local people...is perhaps equally important in the creation of trust. Working with local partners...having a participatory approach...and showing respect for...can all contribute to the development of an environment of trust.” This is important given evidence by Thévenaz and Resodihardjo (2010, p. 16) that it is not uncommon for international disaster management team actors to show ‘little consideration’ for the local context in which they operate.

In terms of confirmation of assumptions (criterion #4), swift trust theory assumes that people in temporary systems rely on categorical assumptions when forming trust and that they then go on to seek confirmatory evidence to validate those assumptions. However, given the general lack of reliance on categorical assumptions we found above, our results indicated that there was little subsequent need for our respondents to validate them and that they tended to rely more on trust criteria that were revealed over time (work ethic, personality, competency, etc.). This may however be less likely between local and international team members where categorical assumptions did seem to play a greater role. However, our results did support the prediction that the spontaneous requirements of disaster management means that, “in an effort to avoid uncertainty, [a] person is likely to be more trusting or more distrustful than any confirmatory data warrants, simply in the interest of reducing uncertainty and getting on with the task”. (Meyerson et al., 1996, p. 177).

In terms of interdependence (criterion #5), swift trust theory predicts that categorical assumptions provide insufficient evidence for a person to trust a colleague if they have a high degree of interdependence (and therefore risk exposure) and that they will go searching for confirmatory evidence to reduce uncertainty. Our results supported this by showing that those with a high perceived degree of interdependence had stronger relational ties driven by the need for more evidence-based information to base their relationship on. Nevertheless, regardless of a respondent’s perceived degree of interdependence, simply being a part of the EOC provided a baseline level of risk exposure due to the high degree of connectivity and shared responsibility in responding effectively to a disaster. The results also support the argument that trust formation can be impacted by group inclusion; as predicted by Meyerson et al. (1996).

These findings also support Kramer and Lewicki (2010) who argue that group membership can in itself lead to trust development through development of an ‘in-group’ identity which differentiates group members from those outside the group (out-group identity). As Popa (2005, p. 79) states “people trust others with whom they work (temporarily) because they perceive their group members as trustworthy.”

Finally, contrary to Meyerson et al. (1996), our findings are inconclusive on the importance of the contractor (Project Manager), to trust formation (criterion #6). The attribute of self-organisation seemed to be more important to an effective response and while local respondents saw the Project Manager as moderately important, the international respondents universally agreed that he was largely irrelevant to trust formation within the EOC. However, our findings do point to specific leadership variables (sound decision-making, clarifying people’s roles within a dynamic context and selecting appropriate personnel) which can help leaders of disaster management team build trust, adding to the work of Schaubroeck, Lam, and Peng (2011) who argue that certain leadership attributes can promote trust among colleagues and toward the leader. In particular, the last criterion (concerning the selection of personnel) supports the research of Burke, Sims, Lazzara, and Salas (2007, p. 615), who argued that trust in leaders is impacted by, “the degree to which leaders are able to manage team composition to ensure the best combination of skills and knowledge exist within the team.”

6. Conclusion

This paper has added valuable conceptual and practical insights into project management by exploring the factors that influence trust development in disaster response and recovery project teams. While some of our findings do support the predictions of swift trust theory (particularly in the criteria of reputation, role and interdependence), predictions around the importance of categorical assumptions, confirmation of those assumptions, and the role of the contractor were not strongly supported. Nevertheless, swift trust theory does appear to provide some useful insights into how trust forms within multinational disaster project management teams and into the types of strategies which project managers might employ to build trust. First, from a practical project management perspective, it is clear that the selection of project team members and the organisations they work for, based on reputation (as well as their formal qualifications on paper), is critical to the formation of trust. However, the practicalities of understanding the reputation of each team member is likely to be easier said than done since reputation is a highly subjective concept with no reliable data to support a decision. The findings also point to the importance of employing people with a trusting disposition who can act with respect, openness, humility and accountability to local EOC leadership. While dictating and clarifying people’s role in the disaster response is important, their demonstrated competency, integrity, and benevolence in performing that role is more important – as is their flexibility and resourcefulness in adapting to the constantly changing challenges of a disaster and their colleagues. In particular, international disaster project management personnel must also be conscious that the disaster management team is operating within a localised context and be sensitive to local cultural traditions and behaviour. Arriving in a host country with a superior attitude is likely to fuel division and resentment rather than trust within the local resident teams and undermine the effectiveness of response. Our results also point to the need for disaster project management team leaders to develop a sense of interdependence, group identity and common purpose. This highlights the importance of collaborative leadership. However, the specific role of the leader seems less important than expected under swift trust theory, although the findings did indicate that the EOC leadership must have respect for local culture and context and suggested that it is probably best to be locally led, if the skills exist to do so. We also found that the head of the EOC can impact trust formation by: displaying leadership and sound decisions, clarifying people’s roles within a flexible organisational structure, and selecting appropriate personnel to be included in the response.
While the insights above advance our understanding of how trust forms in disaster response and recovery projects, we also acknowledge the limitations of this research. While the single case study approach enabled an in-depth investigation of trust formation within a multinational disaster management team, and while the selection of the case study was designed to be representative of other disasters and temporary systems, every disaster comes with a unique set of actors, challenges, environmental constraints, contexts (political, economic, social, cultural), and the EOC may also vary in structure. More research is therefore needed in other disaster management contexts. There is also a need to expand research into trust formation beyond the limitations of an EOC to the wider network of organisations involved in a response. And further research is also required to understand how the composition and assembly of a disaster response and recovery project team can impact how trust forms within it. In particular, our findings spotlight new potential avenues for research in human resource management of temporary teams – specifically around team recruitment, psychological contracts, enabling cross-sector collaboration and managing cultural diversity. We would also note that there are several further disasters since Cyclone Winston which could be studied to add to this work to validate our findings in other settings. Given that this research has highlighted the important role of the ‘informal organisation’ in trust formation, it is also recommended that further research be undertaken to consider the applicability of new institutionalism theories to an EOC, and whether this approach can provide additional insights into trust formation within a disaster management context. Finally, there is a need to explore the value of swift trust theory in other project management contexts. For example, Diallo and Thuiller (2005) found that the trust between the task manager and the coordinator in an international project development context is ‘the key success factor in project management success. More recently, Bon-Barnard et al. (2018) also noted the relevance of swift trust theory as a conceptual lens to understand collaboration in mainstream project management.

References


