

THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF DISTRUST: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL EVOLUTION AND APPLICATIONS IN CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT.

UMAR Bello¹, ABDULAZEEZ Abubakar Dardau¹, IBRAHIM Ahmad Doko², DODO Mansir¹.

¹ Department of Building, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria

² Department of Quantity Surveying, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria.

Correspondence: b.umarbd@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical review of the multidimensional nature of distrust, examining its conceptual evolution and operationalization across various disciplines, with a focus on construction management. The study adopts a structured literature review methodology, systematically analyzing peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and institutional reports from reputable academic databases. Key themes explored include cognitive-affective, behavioral, institutional, and interpersonal dimensions of distrust, alongside their interactions and sector-specific manifestations. The review highlights inconsistencies in definitions, measurement approaches, and empirical gaps, particularly in understudied contexts such as project-based industries and the Global South. Findings underscore the need for integrated frameworks and standardized measurement tools to advance theoretical understanding and practical applications. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research, emphasizing cross-sectoral studies, mixed-method approaches, and context-sensitive models to better address distrust in high-risk environments like construction projects.

Key words: *Effective Dimensions, Behavioral Manifestations, Construction Management, Distrust, Institutional Distrust, Multidimensionality*

INTRODUCTION

Distrust is increasingly recognized as a distinct construct from trust, characterized not merely by its absence but by negative expectations, heightened vigilance, and protective behaviors across different domains including governance, healthcare, technology, and construction (Kramer, 1999; Shea et al., 2008). In sociological and organizational research, distrust is conceptualized as a strategic mechanism for managing uncertainty and risk rather than a purely emotional response (Luhmann, 1979; Sitkin & Roth, 1993).

Over the past two decades, research has moved beyond unidimensional views to a

multidimensional understanding of distrust encompassing cognitive, affective, behavioral, institutional, and interpersonal dimensions (Lewicki et al., 1998; Guo et al., 2017). These dimensions interact in complex ways, shaping individual perceptions, governance structures, and collective outcomes.

In the construction management context, distrust is particularly salient. Project environments are characterized by fragmentation, high uncertainty, role ambiguity, and significant financial and safety risks. Such conditions amplify negative expectations and increase reliance on contractual controls and oversight

mechanisms to manage risk (Jiang et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021). Empirical research indicates that distrust manifests in layered governance practices, such as formal reporting, monitoring, and sanctions, which both reflect and reinforce institutional weaknesses in many project settings.

Despite this growing recognition, conceptual clarity and sector-specific integration remain limited. Existing studies often treat distrust as a simple inverse of trust, overlooking its multidimensional structure and its strategic role in construction governance. This fragmentation has led to inconsistent definitions and weak theoretical integration, particularly in under-researched contexts like the Global South.

This paper therefore aims to critically review the conceptual evolution of distrust and its application to construction management, drawing on cross-disciplinary literature to clarify its core dimensions, theoretical roots, and contextual manifestations. It seeks to establish a clearer conceptual framework that can inform empirical research and governance practice in construction.

Working Definition of Distrust

This paper adopts the definition by Kramer (1999) and Lewicki *et al.* (1998), framing distrust as “*a confident negative expectation regarding another’s conduct, intentions, or reliability.*” This anticipatory perspective aligns with the governance and risk management characteristics of construction projects, where distrust is often embedded in institutional mechanisms such as contracts, performance bonds, and verification systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Roots of Distrust

The conceptual roots of distrust can be traced to classical sociology and early organizational psychology, where distrust was distinguished from low trust as an active, deliberate mechanism to navigate uncertainty

(Luhmann, 1979; Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Early perspectives viewed distrust as the negative endpoint of a trust continuum (Deutsch, 1958; Rotter, 1967), but later models established it as a separate construct with unique antecedents, processes, and outcomes (Lewicki et al., 1998; Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999). These developments set the foundation for multidimensional frameworks encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996; Schoorman et al., 2007).

Multidimensional Perspectives

Modern distrust theory recognizes at least five dimensions:

1. **Cognitive distrust:** rational judgments about competence and reliability;
2. **Affective distrust:** emotional suspicion and fear of opportunism;
3. **Behavioral distrust:** actions such as monitoring or avoidance (Sitkin & Roth, 1993);
4. **Institutional distrust:** loss of faith in governance structures and regulations (Hardin, 2002);
5. **Interpersonal distrust:** relational suspicion based on past experiences (Lewicki et al., 1998).

This multidimensional framing has been applied in fields like healthcare (Rose et al., 2004), political science, and organizational governance. However, application in construction remains underdeveloped.

General Frameworks and Sectoral Gaps

Existing models (e.g., Lewicki et al., 1998; Kramer, 1999) are well established but do not adequately reflect the high-risk, temporary, and fragmented nature of construction projects. Construction contexts elevate institutional distrust to a central, rather than background factor, unlike in many organizational settings (Wang et al., 2021). Weak regulatory enforcement, opportunistic contracting, and role ambiguity exacerbate

distrust at multiple levels (Jiang et al., 2017). This mismatch highlights the conceptual misalignment between traditional

frameworks and construction realities, pointing to research opportunities for adaptation and extension of these models.

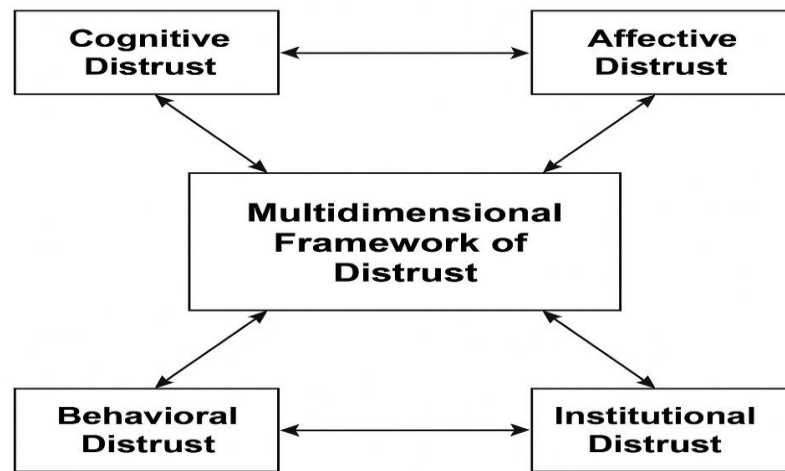


Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the multidimensional nature of distrust and the interaction between its cognitive, affective, behavioral, institutional, and interpersonal dimensions

To synthesize the theoretical perspectives and thematic strands reviewed, this paper develops a conceptual framework illustrating the multidimensional structure of distrust. As shown in Figure 1, distrust is conceptualized as a central construct that manifests through five interrelated dimensions: cognitive, affective, behavioral, institutional, and interpersonal.

These dimensions interact dynamically rather than operating in isolation. Cognitive and affective distrust shape perceptions and judgments; behavioral distrust reflects protective actions and monitoring mechanisms; institutional distrust emerges from systemic weaknesses; and interpersonal distrust is rooted in dyadic and team-level interactions. The interplay among these dimensions provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how distrust functions across multiple levels of analysis, including its translation into construction management practice.

Relevance to Construction Management

By situating distrust within its multidimensional theoretical roots and contextualizing it for the construction industry, this paper addresses a disciplinary gap. A refined conceptual understanding of distrust can enhance governance strategies, inform contract design, and support more resilient project delivery mechanisms in high-uncertainty environments (Kostis et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a structured literature review approach aimed at critically examining the conceptual evolution and multidimensional framing of distrust. A structured review method was preferred because it allows for systematic mapping and synthesis of conceptual developments across disciplines (Snyder, 2019).

Literature Selection and Timeframe Justification

The review focused on literature published up to 2021, capturing more than two decades of conceptual development in trust and distrust research. This timeframe was selected for two main reasons:

1. It covers the period during which most major theoretical frameworks on distrust were established, including the cognitive–affective and institutional perspectives (e.g., Kramer, 1999; Lewicki et al., 1998).
2. It allows for comprehensive analysis of mature frameworks before the surge of more recent empirical studies, thereby ensuring conceptual clarity and historical depth.

Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were searched using combinations of keywords including distrust, trust–distrust dynamics, cognitive distrust, affective distrust, and institutional distrust. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and reputable reports were included to ensure quality and credibility.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria required that selected studies (a) explicitly define or conceptualize distrust, (b) provide theoretical or empirical insight relevant to governance and organizational behavior, and (c) contribute to understanding its multidimensionality. Exclusion criteria included articles with only superficial mentions of distrust, non-scholarly sources, and works focusing exclusively on unrelated domains.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

A thematic coding approach was applied to synthesize findings. Initial coding involved categorizing content under broad dimensions of distrust:

- i. Cognitive (negative expectations about competence and reliability),

- ii. Affective (emotional suspicion, fear, perceived malevolence),
- iii. Behavioral (manifestations such as monitoring or avoidance),
- iv. Institutional (perceptions of weak systems or structures), and
- v. Interpersonal (relational distrust based on prior interactions).

Coding was guided by the iterative constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), allowing refinement of categories as patterns emerged. To enhance credibility and transparency, the coding process included multiple reviews and cross-checking of emerging themes with existing theoretical frameworks.

Data Synthesis

Findings were synthesized using a narrative integrative approach, enabling comparison between general theoretical models and construction-sector realities. This facilitated the identification of conceptual gaps, misalignments, and research opportunities specific to construction management.

RESULTS

Conceptualizing Distrust

The conceptual roots of distrust trace back to classical sociology and organizational psychology, where distrust was recognized not merely as low trust but as a purposeful, independent mechanism to navigate social complexity (Luhmann, 1979; Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Hardin (2002) and Sitkin and Roth (1993) articulated this early distinction by noting that distrust often arises when values or beliefs are perceived to be misaligned particularly within organizations, highlighting its origin as normative rather than emotional or reactive. Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies (1998) further emphasized that “low distrust is not the same as high trust, and high distrust is not the same as low trust,” challenging assumptions that distrust is merely an inverse of trust.

A longstanding debate centers on whether distrust simply reflects the absence of trust, the polar opposite on a continuum, or an entirely separate construct. Early psychological models (e.g., Rotter, Deutsch) often portrayed distrust as the negative endpoint of trust (polar opposite view), but more recent interdisciplinary research favors the distinct-construct perspective, in which both trust and distrust can co-exist independently and simultaneously (Lewicki et al., 1998; Hardin, 2002; Schoorman et al., 2007; Kostis et al., 2022). Empirical evidence showing differing antecedents; such as genetic predispositions influencing trust but not distrust all reinforces the notion of separateness between trust and distrust.

Differentiating trust and distrust along multiple dimensions has gained traction. Conceptually, trust is often associated with beliefs in another's ability, benevolence, and integrity, whereas distrust evokes suspicion about motives, fear of deception, and expectations of harm (Kramer, 1999; Deutsch, 1958; Schul et al., 2008). Cacioppo and Berntson's affective model suggests that trust and distrust are independent evaluative dimensions similar to positive and negative affect. This validates the idea of their potential co-existence within the same.

Conceptualizations of distrust frequently categorize it along cognitive, affective, behavioral, structural/institutional, and interpersonal dimensions. The cognitive dimension refers to rational judgments about competence and reliability; affective distrust captures emotional reactions such as wariness, cynicism, and fear; behavioral intentions include avoidance or heightened monitoring; structural or institutional distrust involves lack of confidence in governance, norms, or contracts; and interpersonal distrust reflects suspicion at the relational level. Scholars such as Lewicki et al. (1998) and Sitkin & Roth (1993) underscored the multilayered nature of distrust, noting its

cognitive, affective, and behavioral antecedents and consequences within organizational settings.

Recent reviews have reinforced these dimensions, pointing out the need for conceptual precision and boundary clarity. For example, distinguishing dispositional distrust from situational distrust, or differentiating between institutional and interpersonal forms (Lewicki et al., 1998; Schoorman et al., 2007; Guo et al., 2017). These multidimensional perspectives bolster our understanding of distrust not only as an abstract theoretical construct, but as an operationalizable phenomenon manifesting in real-world contexts such as organizational decision-making, governance risk, and project relationships.

This section lays the groundwork for situating various definitions, debates, and dimensions in subsequent sections, particularly those exploring how distrust functions in sectors like construction management, where institutional, behavioral, cognitive, and affective factors intersect in complex, high-risk project environments.

RESULTS

The systematic review identified five dominant dimensions of distrust across the selected literature: cognitive, affective, behavioral, institutional, and interpersonal. These dimensions capture distinct but interrelated ways in which distrust is defined, expressed, and operationalized in different contexts.

Cognitive Distrust

Cognitive distrust emerged as the most frequently emphasized dimension in the reviewed studies. It is defined by rational negative expectations regarding another party's competence, reliability, or performance (Lewicki et al., 1998; Kramer, 1999). Cognitive distrust is often linked to perceived uncertainty, inconsistency in

communication, and performance unreliability.

Affective Distrust

Affective distrust reflects emotional reactions such as suspicion, fear, resentment, or perceived malevolence. It is shaped by value incongruence, negative prior experiences, and perceived threats (Sitkin & Roth, 1993; Guo et al., 2017). This dimension tends to escalate tensions and influence relational dynamics.

Behavioral Distrust

Behavioral distrust represents the observable manifestations of internalized distrust. These include increased monitoring, control mechanisms, avoidance, and reduced information sharing (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). It signals a shift from perception to action.

Institutional Distrust

Institutional distrust relates to negative expectations toward systems, regulatory frameworks, or governance structures rather than specific actors (Hardin, 2002). It often stems from perceptions of weak enforcement, corruption, or procedural inconsistency.

Interpersonal Distrust

Interpersonal distrust arises from dyadic or team-level relationships and is often reinforced by past experiences, communication failures, and role ambiguity (Lewicki et al., 1998). This dimension operates at the micro level but significantly affects collaborative environments.

DISCUSSION

The findings underscore the multidimensional nature of distrust, showing how it operates across different levels of analysis and affects construction management in unique ways. Each dimension carries practical governance implications that extend beyond theoretical framing.

Cognitive Distrust and Contractual Governance

Cognitive distrust often drives stakeholders in construction to adopt risk-averse strategies. This includes strict contract clauses, performance bonds, milestone-based payments, and technical audits. While these mechanisms help manage uncertainty, they may also reduce flexibility and impede innovation when overemphasized.

Affective Distrust and Team Dynamics

Affective distrust affects psychological safety and collaborative performance. In construction projects, emotionally driven suspicion can intensify conflict escalation and adversarial behaviors among contractors, consultants, and clients. Addressing this requires deliberate conflict resolution strategies and transparent communication.

Behavioral Distrust and Control Mechanisms

Behavioral distrust is particularly salient in high-risk project environments. In construction, this is visible in rigid inspection protocols, frequent reporting, and layered approval processes. These practices can safeguard accountability but often increase transaction costs and slow down project delivery if not balanced with cooperative measures.

Institutional Distrust and Regulatory Weaknesses

Institutional distrust reflects systemic governance deficiencies. In many construction contexts, distrust in regulatory bodies or procurement systems leads to defensive contracting, reduced transparency, and reliance on informal enforcement. Strengthening institutional frameworks and ensuring consistent regulatory oversight is essential to mitigate this dimension.

Interpersonal Distrust and Collaborative Delivery Models

Interpersonal distrust disrupts communication and team cohesion in temporary project structures. It contributes to siloed decision-making and risk aversion. Mechanisms such as partnering agreements, integrated project delivery, and structured trust-building interventions can help reduce interpersonal suspicion.

Integrated Implications for Construction Management

The interaction between these dimensions reflects a multi-layered distrust environment in construction. Cognitive and behavioral distrust drive formal control systems; affective and interpersonal distrust shape collaboration; institutional distrust defines the macro context. Effective governance requires managing these interdependencies holistically, balancing formal control with relational trust-building strategies.

Gaps in the Literature and Research Implications

Despite significant conceptual advances in understanding distrust as a multidimensional construct, important gaps remain in how these dimensions are operationalized, empirically tested, and contextualized across sectors. One critical gap lies in the inconsistent and often vague operationalization of distrust dimensions. While scholars frequently distinguish between cognitive, affective, behavioral, and institutional forms, few studies have translated these constructs into rigorously validated instruments. The absence of standardized measurement tools hinders comparability across studies and sectors, limiting the practical utility of multidimensional models.

Additionally, although the conceptual literature on distrust is rich, there is a notable lack of empirical testing across diverse

sectors and cultures. Much of the existing evidence comes from Western, corporate, or governmental settings, leaving project-based sectors such as construction, infrastructure development, and logistics relatively underexplored. Studies focusing on distrust in formal organizations rarely address the complexities found in temporary, multi-actor environments, where overlapping accountabilities and fragmented relationships are common. In such contexts, distrust may emerge differently or hold varying implications for outcomes like coordination, compliance, and innovation.

Another persistent blind spot is the limited focus on understudied contexts, particularly those in the global South, informal sectors, and decentralized project-based industries. For instance, in many Sub-Saharan African countries, institutional distrust is widespread due to political instability and weak regulatory enforcement, yet these dynamics are rarely reflected in dominant models. Similarly, informal construction firms and project alliances often rely on social capital and reputation-based governance, making existing cognitive-affective models of distrust potentially inadequate or inapplicable. This contextual imbalance narrows the generalizability of current theories.

In light of these limitations, several suggestions for future research emerge. First, there is a need for cross-sectoral comparative studies to examine how distrust dimensions manifest and interact in different industries—such as construction, healthcare, technology, and public service. Such research can help uncover sector-specific drivers and moderating variables, enhancing the contextual sensitivity of existing models.

Second, researchers should adopt mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative validation. Qualitative interviews and case studies can uncover the nuanced, context-specific nature

of distrust, while surveys and experiments can test the dimensional structure and predictive validity of distrust models. This dual approach would help bridge the gap between theory and application.

Third, a research priority should be the development of robust, multidimensional measurement instruments. These tools must be theoretically grounded, culturally adaptable, and empirically validated. For instance, a distrust scale usable in construction projects in Nigeria or Brazil should reflect both universal dimensions (e.g., cognitive competence) and local institutional realities (e.g., public procurement corruption, informal enforcement).

Overall, addressing these gaps will not only advance theoretical understanding but also improve practice in sectors where trust and distrust shape collaboration, governance, and performance. Construction management, which is characterized by temporary organizations, high uncertainty, and cross-functional teams offers an ideal setting for such inquiry, and future work in this area can contribute significantly to both distrust scholarship and project delivery effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This paper critically reviewed the conceptual evolution of distrust as a multidimensional construct, highlighting five core dimensions; cognitive, affective, behavioral, institutional, and interpersonal. The review reveals that distrust is not merely the absence of trust but a distinct, structured phenomenon that operates across multiple levels of governance and interaction. These dimensions interact dynamically, shaping both formal control mechanisms and relational dynamics in complex project environments such as construction.

Theoretical Insights

The review contributes to theory by consolidating and extending existing frameworks (e.g., Lewicki et al., 1998; Kramer, 1999) and situating them within construction management scholarship. It underscores the need to move beyond binary trust–distrust perspectives and instead adopt a multilevel, multidimensional lens that recognizes distrust as both a risk management strategy and a governance tool. This reconceptualization opens opportunities for developing context-sensitive frameworks that account for institutional fragility, contractual complexity, and temporary project structures.

Practical Implications for Construction Management

In practice, the findings underscore the importance of balancing formal control with trust-building strategies.

- i. Cognitive and behavioral distrust should be managed through transparent contract management, performance assurance, and efficient monitoring rather than overregulation.
- ii. Affective and interpersonal distrust require deliberate strategies such as partnering agreements, integrated project delivery, and communication protocols that foster psychological safety.
- iii. Addressing institutional distrust calls for regulatory strengthening, predictable enforcement, and the institutionalization of credible dispute resolution systems.

For practitioners, recognizing distrust as a structured governance issue rather than a relational failure can enhance risk allocation, decision-making, and project performance.

Directions for Future Research

The findings reveal several promising areas for future inquiry. There is a need to:

1. Develop context-specific conceptual and measurement frameworks to capture the multiple dimensions of distrust in construction.
2. Examine how distrust evolves across the life cycle of construction projects, especially in low-trust institutional environments.
3. Explore the interplay of distrust and trust in collaborative delivery models, including PPPs, design-build, and integrated project delivery.
4. Empirically test interventions aimed at managing distrust strategically rather than reactively.

By reframing distrust as a legitimate governance mechanism, this study lays a theoretical and practical foundation for more nuanced, effective strategies in construction project management and policy.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, K., Rose, A., Peters, N., Long, J. A., McMurphy, S., & Shea, J. A. (2006). Distrust of the health care system and self-reported health in the United States. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 21(4), 292–297. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-1497.2006.00396.x>
- Bijlsma-Frankema, K., Sitkin, S. B., & Weibel, A. (2015). Distrust in the balance: The emergence and development of intergroup distrust in a court of law. *Organization Science*, 26(4), 1018–1039. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2015.0977>
- Cacioppo, J. T., & Berntson, G. G. (1994). Relationship between attitudes and evaluative space: A critical review, with emphasis on the separability of positive and negative substrates. *Psychological Bulletin*, 115(3), 401–423. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.115.3.401>
- Cummings, L. L., & Bromiley, P. (1996). The organizational trust inventory (OTI): Development and validation. In R. M. Kramer & T. R. Tyler (Eds.), *Trust in organizations: Frontiers of theory and research* (pp. 302–330). Sage.
- Deutsch, M. (1958). Trust and suspicion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2(4), 265–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027580200401>
- Guo, C., Lumineau, F., & Lewicki, R. J. (2017). Revisiting the foundations of organizational distrust. *Foundations and Trends in Management*, 1(1), 1–88. <https://doi.org/10.1561/34000000001>
- Hardin, R. (2002). *Trust and trustworthiness*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Jiang, W., Zhao, X., & Zuo, J. (2017). (Dis)Trust, control, and project success: From a Chinese project owner's perspective. *Sustainability*, 9(11), 1936. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9111936>
- Kostis, A., Bengtsson, M., & Näsholm, M. H. (2022). Mechanisms and dynamics in the interplay of trust and distrust: Insights from project-based collaboration. *Organization Studies*, 43(8), 1173–1196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406211040215>
- Kramer, R. M. (1999). Trust and distrust in organizations: Emerging perspectives, enduring questions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 569–598. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.569>
- Lewicki, R. J., McAllister, D. J., & Bies, R. J. (1998). Trust and distrust: New relationships and realities. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 438–458. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259288>
- Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and power*. Wiley.

- Marková, I., & Gillespie, A. (Eds.). (2007). Trust and distrust: Sociocultural perspectives. Information Age Publishing.
- Rose, A., Peters, N., Shea, J. A., & Armstrong, K. (2004). Development and testing of the health care system distrust scale. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 19(1), 57–63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-1497.2004.21146.x>
- Rotter, J. B. (1967). A new scale for the measurement of interpersonal trust. *Journal of Personality*, 35(4), 651–665. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1967.tb01454.x>
- Schul, Y., Mayo, R., & Burnstein, E. (2008). The value of distrust. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44(5), 1293–1302. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.05.003>
- Schoorman, F. D., Mayer, R. C., & Davis, J. H. (2007). An integrative model of organizational trust: Past, present, and future. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 344–354. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.24348410>
- Shea, J. A., Micco, E., Dean, L. T., McMurphy, S., Schwartz, J. S., & Armstrong, K. (2008). Development of a revised health care system distrust scale. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 23(6), 727–732. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-008-0575-3>
- Sitkin, S. B., & Roth, N. L. (1993). Explaining the limited effectiveness of legalistic “remedies” for trust/distrust. *Organization Science*, 4(3), 367–392. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.4.3.367>
- Wang, Y., Liu, F., Zhang, Y., & Gong, E. (2021). Surviving trust from conflict in the construction industry: An interaction between conflict handling behaviors, behavioral outcomes, conflict and trust. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 32(4), 648–672. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-11-2020-0189>