

# How Organizational Is Interorganizational Trust?

**Oliver Schilke\***

The University of Arizona  
Eller College of Management  
405GG McClelland Hall, 1130 E. Helen St.  
Tucson, AZ 85721, USA  
Email: [oschilke@arizona.edu](mailto:oschilke@arizona.edu)

**Fabrice Lumineau**

University of Hong Kong  
HKU Business School  
4/F, K.K. Leung Building, Pok Fu Lam Rd.  
Pok Fu Lam, Hong Kong  
Email: [lumineau@hku.hk](mailto:lumineau@hku.hk)

Accepted at *Academy of Management Review*, July 17, 2023

The authors are thankful for the insightful suggestions provided by the handling guest editor, Aks Zaheer, and three anonymous reviewers. We gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper provided by Anna Brattström, Ron Burt, Ilya Cuypers, Bart de Jong, Ashley Fulmer, Melissa Graebner, Shiau-Ling Guo, Patrick Haack, Rekha Krishnan, Matthew Lee, Chris Long, Bill McEvily, Bart Nooteboom, and Wenqian Wang. The paper benefitted from discussions with participants of the 11th First International Network on Trust (FINT) Workshop in Charleston, SC.

\* Corresponding Author

## **ABSTRACT**

Trust represents a key social mechanism facilitating collaboration in interorganizational relationships. Yet, the concept of interorganizational trust is surrounded by substantial ambiguity, especially as it pertains to the levels of analysis at which it is located. Some scholars maintain that trust is an inherently individual-level phenomenon, whereas others insist that organizations constitute the central sources and referents of trust in interorganizational relationships. Our article addresses this controversy, aiming to reduce conceptual ambiguity and foster cumulative progress. Using a micro-sociological approach, we advance knowledge of the meaning and context-specific relevance of individual- vs. organizational-level trust. Specifically, we apply the notion of organizational actorhood to both the trustor and the trustee in an interorganizational relationship. We then build on micro-institutional and entitativity theory to offer a model of the antecedents of organizational actorhood that identifies a set of contextual conditions explaining the degree to which an organization rather than individuals within it constitutes the focal origin and target of trust. The contingent account we propose here helps bridge disparate traditions of scholarship on interorganizational trust by highlighting that trust can, but need not always, reside to a substantial extent at a supraindividual level of analysis.

**Keywords:** trust, interorganizational relationships, actorhood, levels of analysis, institutional theory, entitativity

Supported by a substantial body of literature, it is now widely accepted that trust—broadly understood as “the decision to rely on another ... party ... under a condition of risk” (Currall & Inkpen, 2002: 484)<sup>1</sup>—is central to interorganizational relationships (McEvily & Zaheer, 2006; Poppo, Zhou, & Li, 2016; Schilke, Wiedenfels, Brettel, & Zucker, 2017). However, what remains less clear-cut is the ontological meaning of interorganizational trust. In fact, much of the literature on interorganizational trust is divided, with different scholars locating the concept at different levels of analysis. Some view interorganizational trust as residing in the micro-level relationship between individual members of distinct organizations (Blois, 1999; Dyer & Chu, 2000), while others conceptualize it at the macro level, between one organization and another (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Sydow, 2006). To start overcoming this unfortunate micro/macro divide, scholars have noted that trust may be located at both the individual and organizational level and, as such, should be thought of as two distinct constructs that can coexist and be interrelated (e.g., Brattström & Faems, 2020; Lumineau & Schilke, 2018; Schilke & Cook, 2013; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998). However, there is still no clear theoretical understanding of the relative importance of one versus the other and of the relevant conditions that explain this cross-level tension. For interorganizational trust scholarship to make more informed, context-specific judgements about the relative significance of individuals and organizations for explaining trust decisions, we thus need a theoretical framework that identifies the specific circumstances under which interorganizational trust is comparatively more individual vs. organizational in nature. This undertaking is of great importance in capturing the

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<sup>1</sup> While the literature lacks complete agreement on a single definition of trust, most definitions converge in their emphasis on the willingness to take the risk of relying on, and thus making oneself vulnerable to, the actions of another party (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2021). Here, we adopt the definition proposed by Currall and Inkpen (2002), who convincingly argue it is particularly amenable to multi-level theorizing and able to “travel” across individual and organizational units of analysis (also see Janowicz & Noorderhaven, 2006; McEvily & Zaheer, 2006).

actual mechanisms at play in interorganizational relationships and expanding our knowledge regarding trust accuracy, which refers to the ability to allocate trust when it is warranted but withhold it when it would be breached (Schilke & Huang, 2018; Yamagishi, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to develop such a framework and help reduce conceptual ambiguity by advancing a context-dependent middle ground for conceptualizing interorganizational trust. We revisit the long-standing question of whether organizations can trust and be trusted (e.g., Doney & Cannon, 1997; Dyer & Chu, 2000; Zaheer et al., 1998) and reframe it to foreground the *extent* to which organizations have these capacities and the *conditions* that explain it. Acknowledging that interorganizational trust can, to varying degrees, exist at both the individual and organizational levels, we introduce to trust scholarship the notion of “organizational actorhood,” which allows us to develop a contextual theory to explain the relative importance of these levels. Following the seminal work of Coleman (1974), Scott and Meyer (1994), and King, Felin, and Whetten (2010), we understand organizational actorhood as the degree to which an organization is perceived as a self-governing collective entity not reducible to individual agents. In the context of interorganizational trust, a very low degree of organizational actorhood indicates that individuals (and not the organization) are the primary carriers of trust in interorganizational exchange, whereas a higher degree of organizational actorhood indicates the organizational collectivity has greater authority in decisions related to trust and trustworthiness, with less agency among its individual members.

If interorganizational trust can, but does not always have to, reside to a substantial extent at the organizational level of analysis, it is important to understand the specific conditions that explain such variations. We thus advance a model that identifies relevant antecedents of the degree of organizational actorhood, for both the trustor (i.e., the source of trust or the entity

doing the trusting) and trustee (i.e., the target of trust or the entity being trusted) sides of the interorganizational dyad.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, our research addresses prior calls for greater insight into the contingencies that explain the extent to which individuals and organizations matter for trust in interorganizational relationships (Zaheer & Harris, 2006). Our research is also consistent with Jones and Shah's (2016) observation that trust can be located in distinct "centers of action" whose relative significance should be juxtaposed through contingent theorizing.

In developing our model, we adopt a micro-sociological approach that interprets social processes as multi-layered phenomena (Stolte, Fine, & Cook, 2001) and thus offers an ideal window into the interface between individuals and their organizational context (Fine, 1991). In particular, we bring together micro-institutional theory (Harmon, Haack, & Roulet, 2019; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Schilke, 2018; Zucker, 1991) and entitativity theory (Campbell, 1958; Emirbayer, 1997; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1977) to develop a contingent account of the extent to which organizations constitute relevant origins and targets of trust.

The paper proceeds as follows. We start by presenting the thesis that trust is ultimately an individual-level phenomenon and then consider the antithesis that it resides at a collective level of analysis. The synthesis that follows describes the gradual and contingent middle ground that provides the springboard for our theorizing and gives rise to the concept of organizational actorhood. The main part of the paper develops our theoretical model, identifying the predictors of organizational actorhood for both the source and target of trust. Our discussion highlights the theoretical and practical significance of our account by elaborating its implications for our understanding of trust, and we also address the article's contributions to organizational actorhood research outside of the trust domain.

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we make the simplifying assumption of a bilateral (rather than multilateral) interorganizational relationship.

We propose a contingent approach to interorganizational trust, which acknowledges that trust can exist at both individual and collective levels of analysis but allows for these levels to differ in relevance depending on the context. This approach fills a significant void in the literature by providing a more nuanced perspective on trust in interorganizational relationships. Our approach shifts thinking about the loci of interorganizational trust in three main ways. First, interorganizational trust is not a uniform concept and can vary substantially in terms of the involved organizations' actorhood. Second, attention to levels of analysis adds conceptual precision and helps avoid under-specification. Third, understanding the organizational actorhood of trust protagonists has significant practical importance in terms of its implications for trust accuracy and agility in interorganizational exchange. Our approach thus establishes a middle ground between extreme positions that view interorganizational trust as confined either to individuals or to organizations and offers a theoretical basis for making informed predictions about the relative importance of trust at different levels of analysis.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The well-known thought experiment "the ship of Theseus," discussed initially by Plutarch, concerns whether a wooden ship that has been restored by replacing every single part remains the same ship. This example illustrates the fundamental philosophical question of whether an object that has had all its components replaced remains fundamentally the same (Hobbes, 1994 [1640]; Locke, 1975 [1690]). A related debate manifests as a major fault line in trust scholarship in terms of the locus of interorganizational trust and, in particular, the relationship between the parts (i.e., individuals) and the whole (i.e., the organization). That is, does organization-level trust (the ship) remain the same when all the individuals working in the

organization (the parts) are replaced by different individuals?<sup>3</sup>

We approach the question of the relevance of individuals and organizations for interorganizational trust from a dialectical perspective and present our argument in three subsections that reflect radically different approaches to the issue. First, the *thesis* argues that individuals are the sources and targets of interorganizational trust. Second, the *antithesis* contends such trust in fact arises from and is invested in organizations. Third, our *synthesis* integrates these opposing views to advance the idea that the trustor's and trustee's organizational actorhood can be viewed as a gradual and contingent concept. Consistent with the dialectical logic underlying our theory building, we articulate our arguments around two extreme positions in the existing literature that allow us to systematically contrast diverging arguments (Doty & Glick, 1994).

### **Thesis: Individuals Are the Sources and Targets of Trust**

Some scholars have portrayed interorganizational trust as an inherently individual-level phenomenon. In terms of the source of trust, Blois (1999: 203) illustrates this viewpoint, unambiguously claiming that “trust can only be granted by individuals.” So do Dyer and Chu (2000: 261), who assert that “organizations are not able to trust each other; trust has its basis in individuals.” In other words, only individuals can be ascribed a trustor capacity. Similar arguments have been made with regard to the trustee side of the relation, with some scholars contending that only individuals (and not collectivities such as organizations) can be the targets of trust (Cook, Hardin, & Levi, 2005: 5). Proponents of this position hold that “the organization does not display trustworthiness—its members do” (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009: 130).

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<sup>3</sup> To be clear, the Ship of Theseus and our argument relate to slightly different continua. The Ship of Theseus metaphor focuses on the relationship between the original ship and another version of it that has been restored by replacing every single part. It compares different versions of the same object (i.e., a ship) and is interested in the progressive replacement of the components over time. In contrast, our argument relates to variations in the degree of organizational actorhood, from a mere collection of individuals to an entity *sui generis*, without an explicit focus on temporal change.

This individual-level approach to conceptualizing interorganizational trust is grounded in the social science tradition of atomism, and more specifically in methodological individualism, in which social phenomena fundamentally result from individual action. It thus assumes that social phenomena are the aggregate result of (or a product of spontaneous order among) the behavior and choices of individuals (Hayek, 1942). This approach especially builds on the philosophy of Watkins (1957: 105), who claimed that the “ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people,” as well as that of Elster (1982: 463), who argued that “the elementary unit of social life is the individual human action.” The locus of agency is therefore squarely at the individual level, whereas the organization merely serves as the structural platform on which localized action forms. This viewpoint requires a commitment to the primacy of micro factors in explaining macro social phenomena (Alexander, 1987). Indeed, proponents of this “bottom-up approach” would contend that, if it is made of different components, the ship of Theseus is clearly a different ship. In the context of interorganizational trust scholarship, this reasoning implies that there is no such phenomenon as organizational trust, because an organization is only a collection of individuals. Organizations are thus relegated to mere parameters of individual actors’ trust decisions or to contextual backgrounds to the relationships between individuals.

### **Antithesis: Organizations Are the Sources and Targets of Trust**

In contrast to the above thesis (and consistent with the dialectical logic of juxtaposing ideal types), it can instead be argued that organizations are the focal sources and targets of interorganizational trust. Many trust scholars support this viewpoint and maintain that organizational-level trust cannot be reduced to trust by or in individuals; it is instead organizations that represent the focal carriers of interorganizational trust. These scholars would suggest that the ship of Theseus remains fundamentally the same object even though all its original timber has been replaced (Coleman, 1974). More concretely, they view



interorganizational trust as robust to the departures of individual people, as newcomers will be socialized into the existing, organizationally-constituted practices (Lane & Bachmann, 1996).

In interorganizational trust scholarship, this line of thought is reflected, for instance, in the work of Sydow (1998: 44), who argues that “social systems, such as organizations ... [are] seen as corporate agents with distinct structural properties not reduceable to the individual agents.” Similarly, Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis (2007: 346) insist that “organizations can both garner trust from other parties and trust other parties.”

While the arguments underlying the previously discussed thesis relate to methodological individualism, the antithesis draws on methodological holism. This concept can be traced back to Plato and has occupied an important place in philosophy and the social sciences since Hegel. The methodological individualism vs. holism debate concerns the proper focus of explanations in the social sciences: should social scientific explanations center on individuals or on collectivities? The proponents of the antithesis contend that organizations are the primary targets and sources of interorganizational trust, the substance of which goes above and beyond the individuals involved. One can characterize this approach as holistic because it considers the organization to be more than a collection of its members. One can also deem it antireductionist because it argues that the properties of organizations cannot be explained in terms of their constituent parts and the interactions thereof. Instead, this antithesis conceives of organizations as distinct social units with emergent properties that exist separately and independently from the individuals who constitute them. The locus of action resides at the collective level, such that organizations can effectuate behavior beyond the reach of individuals’ propensities or wills. Thus, organizational trust exists *sui generis*, in its own right, and autonomously from the level of individuals (Simmel, 1971). As social entities, organizations have causal powers that are independent of, and

supersede, those of their individual members. Individuals' functions are confined to performing their organizational roles and enacting organizational structures that prescribe trust and trustworthiness behavior. As a result, this perspective considers organizations—rather than individuals—to be the constitutive elements of interorganizational trust.

### **Synthesis: Organizational Actorhood as a Gradual and Contingent Concept**

As we discussed above, the literature on interorganizational trust has repeatedly raised the question of the relevant level of analysis. Unfortunately, there have been few theoretical attempts to bridge the two camps (see Isaeva, Bachmann, Bristow, & Saunders, 2015; Lumineau & Schilke, 2018 for similar assessments) and provide a more balanced understanding of the locus of interorganizational trust that falls victim to neither an under- nor an oversocialized understanding of the phenomenon (Granovetter, 1985). On the one hand, the undersocialized perspective of methodological individualism cannot adequately capture the intersubjective and socially embedded element that interorganizational trust clearly contains. We thus find it difficult to reduce all interorganizational trust to the individuals constituting the organization. On the other hand, the oversocialized perspective of holism ascribes all explanatory power to the organizational level and, in doing so, completely assumes away individual agency. Although we sympathize with the role-theoretical account that views individuals as organizational representatives, organizational members' sensemaking and behavior regularly go beyond mere role fulfilment and the enactment of organizational structures. Universally reducing individuals to “cultural dopes” (see De Certeau, 1984; Garfinkel, 1967) does not resonate with the rich insights of trust scholars into the processes informing organizational boundary spanners' trust and trustworthiness (e.g., Currall & Judge, 1995; Dodgson, 1993; Perrone, Zaheer, & McEvily, 2003). In sum, the notion that individuals constitute the sole units of interorganizational trust appears as one-sided as the notion that organizations constitute the only relevant level of analysis.

Although trust has long featured prominently in research on interorganizational relationships, scholars are only beginning to unpack its multi-level nature. This is a substantial omission because, as Granovetter (2017: 80) notes, “if we think of trust as being at issue at both levels [e.g., individual and organizational], then this relation becomes especially important to theorize, and I suggest a high level of caution about arguments that link individual decisions to large-scale outcomes without a detailed or plausible account of how this aggregation takes place.” It is our intention to take an important step toward developing such an account—one which elaborates the conditions that explain the significance of trust at the collective, organizational level.

In the wake of Zaheer, McEvily, and Perrone’s (1998) seminal piece—which found that trust at the individual and organizational level are related, with mutually reinforcing effects of trust at the two levels—researchers have argued that trust may reside both at the individual *and* the organizational level and, as such, should be separated into two distinct constructs (also see Jeffries & Reed, 2000), not unlike Luhmann’s (1979) more general discussion of personal trust and system trust (cf. Lumineau, Schilke, & Wang, 2023). Most of this emerging line of scholarship has focused on cross-level associations in the amount of trust, arguing that more trust at one level will be conducive to more trust at the other (e.g., Brattström & Faems, 2020; Costa, Fulmer, & Anderson, 2018; Currall & Inkpen, 2002; Zhang, Viswanathan, & Henke, 2011). This literature has therefore (mostly implicitly) suggested that “trust at each level matters,” without paying much attention to whether one or the other level may be comparatively more relevant in a given setting. What has been missing, however, is a theoretical account that juxtaposes the relative importance of one level versus the other and that identifies the relevant conditions that explain this cross-level tension. As observed by Fulmer and Dirks (2018: 137), “research on trust

incorporating multiple levels of analysis remains limited, while research on trust at different levels of analysis, such as trust in teams and organisations, continues to develop independently with little cross-fertilisation.”

Two relatively recent exceptions are noteworthy. Schilke and Cook (2013) address the relevance of the individual vs. organization level as a function of relationship stage. Starting with the individual boundary spanner as the primary locus of trust in a new interorganizational collaboration, they contend that trust becomes part of the fabric of the organization as the relationship matures. For example, Schilke and Cook (2013) argue that, as part of this process, the individual–organization level may influence trust at the organization–organization level. As more and more members of the focal organizations get involved in the interorganizational relationship, they may strive to form a common understanding of the partner organization’s trustworthiness; in turn, routinized ways of interacting with the partner may develop based on that understanding, at which point we may speak of organization–organization trust (Schilke & Cook, 2013).

Another step in directing attention to levels of analysis is the article by Lumineau and Schilke (2018), who analyze the reciprocal relationship between the individual and organizational levels in trust development and introduce an embedded-agency perspective as a guiding framework for the analysis of cross-level trust evolution.

Yet, although this recent research showcases the growing interest of trust scholars in levels of analysis and is starting to make strides toward a synthetic approach, at least two important gaps remain in these investigations. First, these multi-level theories feature an overly coarse, binary classification that seems to suggest that either only the organization or only the individual matters at a given stage. In our work, we break up this dichotomous distinction to

offer a more nuanced and gradual view of organizational actorhood. Second, our investigation goes beyond Schilke and Cook's (2013) singular focus on relationship stage to elaborate a variety of other relevant conditions that explain the extent to which the individual vs. the organization will represent the focal locus of trust. Therefore, while our approach is certainly consistent with the idea that organizational and individual trust can coexist, we go one step further: rather than implicitly assuming that either both levels of analysis are equally relevant or only one of them matters, we shed light on the relative importance of each. As such, we advance knowledge of the specific conditions under which interorganizational trust is comparatively more individual vs. organizational in nature. This objective addresses Schilke et al.'s (2021: 249) call for more research into the predictors of the most salient social level of analysis (rather than the mere level) of trust.

Filling these gaps allows us to address the limitations inherent in the two ideal types discussed above (i.e., the “thesis” and “antithesis”) and develop a more balanced understanding of the nature of interorganizational trust. To do so, we advocate a synergistic middle ground with two key features: it views entities' organizationalness (1) as a gradual (rather than dichotomous) concept, ranging from low to high as the two extremes, but with many intermediate values,<sup>4</sup> and (2) as a contingent phenomenon whose strength is a function of contextual factors. Our account explicitly acknowledges that interorganizational trust can in principle—but need not necessarily—be highly organizational and elucidates the conditions that explain the appropriateness of a relatively more individualistic or holistic view. That is, we reframe the question of *whether* organizations are relevant sources and targets of trust (McEvily & Zaheer, 2006) to instead examine *when* and *to what extent* this is the case.

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<sup>4</sup> Our theory thus highlights the viewpoint that actorhood differs across organizations by degree, rather than being either present or absent. Our approach is thus decidedly continuous in nature and does not depend on arbitrary cutoffs.

To develop these arguments, we build on the notion of organizational actorhood and relate it to interorganizational trust. Drawing from Coleman (1974), Scott and Meyer (1994), and King et al. (2010), organizational actorhood denotes the degree to which an organization is perceived as a self-governing collective entity not reducible to individual agents. In other words, organizational actorhood is high to the extent that actions are attributable to the organizational collective, rather than to the individuals this collective is composed of (List & Pettit, 2011). Several elements of this conceptualization are worth highlighting. First, its gradual nature (“degree to which”) underlines that organizations can differ markedly in the extent to which they can be viewed as social actors (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017). Further, the definition has a strong social-cognitive component (“perceived to be”); accordingly, we understand actorhood here as less an objective reality than a social construction (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Poppo & Schloemer, 2023) residing in the perceptions of both internal members and external audiences (Halgin, Glynn, & Rockwell, 2018). Finally, the implied cross-level tension (“not reducible to individual agents”) suggests an inverse relationship between the autonomy of the organization and that of individuals; if the organization holds greater autonomy over a given course of action, individual members must yield some of their agency to the organization, and vice versa. As Coleman (1974: 40) insists, to the extent that the organizational body has a capacity to act, each member relinquishes their individual agency over the direction of their actions; this points to a negative connection on a unidimensional scale, such that high organizational actorhood implies low individual actorhood, and vice versa. This viewpoint is consistent with a variance-decomposition logic (Meyer-Doyle, Lee, & Helfat, 2019), which partitions observed behavior into organizational vs. individual sources and determines their relative contribution (we will return to the variance-decomposition approach in our discussion section).

The notion of organizational actorhood goes back almost 50 years, to Coleman (1974). Most contemporary work in this vein has focused on problematizing ontological questions, pointing to inconsistent usages of the term and evaluating its rising prevalence (e.g., Bromley & Sharkey, 2017; Hwang & Colyvas, 2020; Meyer, 2019). Yet, the theorization of organizational actorhood is still in a “nascent state” (Halgin et al., 2018: 647) and “remains vague” (Bitektine, Haack, Bothello, & Mair, 2020: 886). One key reason for this is that there has been surprisingly little systematic research to expand on the concept’s nomological network (King et al., 2010) and particularly on its sources (King, 2015). We believe filling this lacuna can make important contributions to organizational theory, including a fruitful approach to the fundamental question of what makes an organization an organization that is specific (by drawing attention to certain factors that underlie organizational actorhood) yet flexible (by highlighting graduality rather than relying on arbitrary cutoffs).

The concept of organizational actorhood can be usefully applied to a wide variety of social processes. Therefore, a meaningful theory of organizational actorhood needs to be clear on the question, organizational actorhood as to which social process?<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper, organizations can specifically differ in terms of actorhood in their roles as both trustor (source of trust) and trustee (target of trust). On the one hand, organizations vary in the degree to which they make decisions as a collective trustor that cannot be reduced to the trusting decisions of their individual members. On the other hand, an external evaluator may, to varying degrees, place their trust in the focal organization as a social system rather than focus on specific individuals as trustees, thus ascribing different levels of actorhood to a trustee. This distinction is

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<sup>5</sup> It is entirely plausible that a given organization has high actorhood with regard to one social process but low actorhood with regard to another. For instance, interorganizational trust may be highly organizational whereas interorganizational learning may be very localized and primarily attributable to individual boundary spanners (or vice versa).

consistent with Halgin, Glynn, and Rockwell's (2018) position that we must understand organizational actorhood from two distinct perspectives: those of internal constituents (in our case, the trustor perspective) and those of outside evaluators (in our case, the trustee perspective). Similarly, Coleman (1982) distinguishes between the organizational actorhood of the subject of an action (i.e., the trustor) and that of the object of an action (i.e., the trustee), emphasizing the relational character of actorhood and the possibility that it can be asymmetric (Graebner, Lumineau, & Fudge-Kamal, 2020).

It is also important to clarify that an organization's degree of actorhood as trustor and trustee is conceptually independent from the *amount* of trust and trustworthiness. For instance, an organization can have high actorhood as a trustor, with a strong capacity to make independent decisions and take responsibility for how it places trust, while having a low amount of trust (and vice versa). In the same way, an organization can have high actorhood as a trustee if external partners identify it as a clearly independent collective entity, either more or less trustworthy, that goes beyond a mere aggregation of its members. Figure 1 illustrates the orthogonal relationship between degree of organizational actorhood and amount of trust.

---Insert Figure 1 about here---

In sum, trust in interorganizational relationships can be organizational or individual in nature, to varying degrees, as a function of the organizational actorhood of the trustor and trustee. Strong organizational actorhood means that the organizational level has much explanatory power, with members merely enacting the organizational collectivity, whereas weak organizational actorhood suggests that the organization has little influence on trust decisions. Meanwhile, intermediate degrees of organizational actorhood reflect situations in which the organization has some impact on how trust decisions are made but leaves considerable discretion



to individuals. We believe such intermediate degrees will characterize the vast majority of field settings, highlighting the value of the gradual conceptualization we advance here.

### **DRIVERS OF ORGANIZATIONAL ACTORHOOD**

Our position that the degree of organizational actorhood of the parties in a trust relationship can vary along a continuum raises the important question of what may explain such variations, and thus of the antecedents of organizational actorhood. Yet, such a framework has yet to be elaborated; most discussions of organizational actorhood have focused on expounding the concept itself but stopped short of identifying a set of conditions that shape its degree. In short, there is a need for a better understanding of the antecedents of organizational actorhood.

We aim to fill this gap and structure our discussion of relevant antecedents of organizational actorhood by the respective party's role in the trust relation—that is, either as the *trustor* or as the *trustee*. We then extend this analysis by discussing the role of the boundary spanners' power as a critical contingency, as well as by turning to the link between the organizational actorhood of the trustor and that of the trustee.

The trustor needs to determine the extent to which they will place trust in their counterpart. An analysis of the trustor's internal considerations therefore requires an actor perspective that focuses on decision-making processes inside the organization and the experiences of its members. Of course, the factors that drive trust decisions are not only internal considerations but also outside perceptions of the counterpart's characteristics. Analyzing such external assessments calls for an audience (or observer) perspective that captures social-evaluation processes. Social cognition theory has long differentiated between actor and audience perspectives (Jones & Nisbett, 1987; Wyer & Carlston, 1979)—a distinction that can be traced back all the way to Goffman (1959) and that has more recently been reinvigorated by scholarship on social evaluations (Bitektine, 2011; Schilke & Rossman, 2018). In this parlance, the actor

deliberates about certain behavior, while the audience observes others. In our model, the same entity is adopting both perspectives (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). The actor role emphasizes an internal focus on making trust decisions, but, because trust is inherently relational, these trust decisions are substantially informed by perceptions of the counterpart—that is, of the trustee.

Because of their different foci, actor and audience perspectives require different theoretical anchors that draw attention to qualitatively different mechanisms. The actor perspective is mainly about intraorganizational decision-making and thus the factors that impinge upon organizational members in that process. In contrast, the audience perspective pertains to assessments of outside entities and thus externally observable factors. Although several theoretical approaches could plausibly help address these issues, for reasons of parsimony and a strong fit with the purposes of our inquiry, our model draws on one focal theory for each side of the relationship, namely micro-institutional theory for the internal and entitativity theory for the external part of our argument. These two theories are highly appropriate because they directly address the degree of organizational actorhood in relation to organizations' decision-making and outsiders' evaluations, respectively. Indeed, explaining actorhood from an intraorganizational perspective is one of the most prominent issues in contemporary micro-institutional inquiry (Patriotta, 2020), while external attributions of collective actorhood have always been at the very core of entitativity scholarship (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1977). As such, these two theories complement each other well, in that the former draws attention to intraorganizational factors that shape organizational decision-making (interpretation of self), while the latter focuses on factors that are observable to outside evaluators (interpretation of others). Further, the micro-institutional perspective is amenable to developing theory on trust that places local context at

central stage and is interested in how this context shapes actors' cognitions and behavior (Zucker & Schilke, 2020), while entitativity theory has an emphasis on how the characteristics of social context shape attributions of collectivity. These two theories are also particularly useful for our investigation because they fit the gradual (rather than dichotomous) approach that is central to our analysis, as elaborated next. Figure 2 summarizes the conceptual model integrating our theoretical propositions.

---Insert Figure 2 about here---

### **Drivers of the Organizational Actorhood of the Trustor**

Micro-institutional theory is the substream of institutionalism that focuses on phenomena at or below the organizational level of analysis (e.g., Harmon et al., 2019; Kellogg, 2009; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Schilke, 2018; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012; Zucker, 1991), in contrast to the neo-institutional theory of the 1980s to 1990s, which was more concerned with field-level institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Generally, institutions refer to taken-for-granted and normatively sanctioned structural arrangements (Giddens, 1984; Ocasio, Thornton, & Lounsbury, 2017). Experienced as part of the intersubjective world, institutions define rules of behavior and legitimate action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zucker, 1977). We specifically build on the micro-institutional idea of “organizations as institutions” (Selznick, 1957; Zucker, 1983), which—consistent with the holistic view discussed above—considers the possibility that organizations can serve as institutions in their own right and be capable of autonomous action (Bitektine et al., 2020). What sets this theory apart from other holistic approaches, however, is that organizations' degree of institutionalization can explicitly vary along a continuum (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Zucker, 1983). A highly institutionalized organization possesses “an autonomous and unique ‘organizational self’” (Selznick, 1957: 21), with its own purposes and with distinctive behavioral templates that endow it with actorhood (Bitektine et al., 2020). These

types of organizations are, to a certain extent, self-directing entities, providing a frame of reference informed by past experiences that has notable prescriptive implications for member agents' legitimate behavior (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). As a "site of causation" (Abbott, 1995: 873), a highly institutionalized organization both integrates and transcends its individual members, to the extent that such an organization legitimates its own actions (Goodstein, Blair-Loy, & Wharton, 2009; Padgett & Ansell, 1993). In such an organization, actions are "locked-in" for either cognitive, normative, or resource-related reasons and individuals enact known behavioral patterns (Giddens, 1984; Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009). Specifically, from a structuration perspective (Giddens, 1984), rules of signification describe shared understandings, rules of legitimation specify norms, and resources of domination exert coercive pressures on individual members of a highly institutionalized organization (Sydow, 2006). The organizational system gives sense to its member's trust construction through knowledge of these rules and resources, as well as through monitoring (Sydow & Windeler, 2003). Organizations low in institutionalization, by contrast, provide comparatively little prescriptive guidance for their members' joint sensemaking, normative behavior, or controlled action. The organizational perspective then plays no significant role in organizational agents' cognitions and behavior.

The degree of an organization's institutionalization has direct consequences for its actorhood as a trustor. Placing trust in a target is a reflexive process that is highly dependent on the social rules and legitimization processes surrounding it (Brattström & Bachmann, 2018; Kroeger, 2013; Möllering, 2006; Zucker, 1986). If it is taken for granted that (dis)trust is simply "what we do" and that "everyone in this organization" does it, this generates highly institutionalized patterns at the organizational level that function as powerful bases for trust

decisions that clearly go beyond the discretion of individual agents; the organizational actorhood of the trustor will thus be relatively high. Conversely, less institutionalized organizations have fewer impersonal prescriptions and shared representations about how organizational members ought to place trust in a given situation, resulting in greater autonomy for each individual agent and a lower organizational actorhood for the trustor.

If the degree of institutionalization is key to the organizational actorhood of the trustor, we can derive relevant actorhood antecedents by leveraging micro-institutional theory to identify factors that produce variations in institutionalization and thus differences in organizations' tendencies to become personified as trustors. As we elaborate next, three conditions help explain the organizational actorhood of the trustor through a micro-institutional lens: (1) organizational identity strength, (2) formalized organizational structures, and (3) boundary spanning centralization.

First, we propose that the degree of organizational actorhood of the trustor is substantially influenced by the organization's identity. Organizational identity is commonly understood as the central, enduring, and distinct attributes of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), or the collective answer to the question of "who are we as an organization?" It acts as a cognitive filter through which members perceive, interpret, and act upon the organization's external environment (e.g., Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Poppo & Schloemer, 2023), including relevant collaboration partners. The concept of organizational identity is deeply rooted in institutional inquiry (Schilke, 2018). The father of institutional theory, Philip Selznick (1957: 21), was among the first to note that "(a)s an organization acquires a self, a distinctive identity, it becomes an institution." Similarly, Scott (2014) viewed organizational identity as a key ingredient in the taken-for-granted collective character of organizations.

Importantly, the strength of organizational identity—that is, the extent to which identity beliefs are widely shared among members of an organization (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Besharov & Brickson, 2016)—can vary markedly among organizations. For example, the clothing company Patagonia, which has holistically integrated sustainability into its DNA, “epitomizes what it means to be purpose-driven” (Sonsev, 2019). Organizations with strong identities have a distinctive behavioral signature—that is, a coherent pattern of choices that is relatively independent of time and situation (King et al., 2010), and that provides guidance for predictably reproducing the organizational system through everyday interactions (Giddens, 1984; Krishnan, Cook, Kozhikode, & Schilke, 2021; Luhmann, 1995). These organizations’ identities fundamentally shape consequential deliberation and organizational decision making (Steele & King, 2011). Conversely, organizations with a weak identity are often characterized by multiple independent logics, values, incentives, and goals and ultimately provide comparatively little direction to their members (Mayer & Williams, 2021).

The strength of organizational identity constitutes a critical source of institutionalization (Dejordy & Creed, 2016; Greenwood et al., 2011; Schilke, 2018) and thus supports the organization’s capacity to act as a trustor in its own right. To the extent that organizational members share a clear identity, this provides relevant prescriptions for what the organization is and what it does, with direct implications for appropriate trust perceptions and behavior. In organizations with a strong identity, individual agents’ trust is likely to align with the character of the organization and its overall trusting stance (Möllering, 2006). Organizational identity thus creates a strong frame that heavily anchors actors’ sensemaking and their framing of trust decisions. Fukuyama (2001) discusses two insightful extreme cases that vary in their identity strength and organizational actorhood as trustors. On the low end, a “membership organization”

such as the American Association of Retired People (AARP) certainly has little influence on its members' trust decisions. Conversely, a religious sect may demand a certain level of trust from its members in their dealings with other people. At this end of the spectrum, organizational members merely enact internalized identity claims in their roles as representatives of the collectivity and place trust in a way that does not go against the organization's implicit rules for social interaction. Thus, trust is the result of conformity to organizational norms and is driven by an organizationally anchored identity that prescribes appropriate trust behavior.

*Proposition 1. The stronger the organizational identity of an organization, the stronger its actorhood as a trustor.*

Second, formal organizational structures provide another explanation for the trusting organization's degree of actorhood. Just as organizational identity guides agents through informal directives about appropriate cognition and behavior, organizational structures guide cognition and behavior through formal rules, incentive systems, explicit norms, and specific routines (King et al., 2010). As a normative context that shapes reality for the organization, formal structures support institutionalized decision-making (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007), including decision-making related to trust, and thus the organization's actorhood as a trustor. Formal structures demarcate information environments (Turner & Makhija, 2006) and specify behavioral constraints that define how members should carry out their duties when acting on behalf of the organization (Jacobides, 2007). For instance, formal job ranks place considerable limits on individuals' agency and thus produce organizational constraints (Soda, Zaheer, Sun, & Cui, 2021). Roles fulfill similar purposes, in that the actions of a role owner are largely attributable to the organization (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). To the extent that such formal structures are valued and enforced within an organization, the source of action moves away from individual members' discretion toward the organization as a collective

decision maker that prescribes and regulates members' behavior (Perrone et al., 2003). As such, structures are key to organizations' collective decision-making capacity and a fundamental component to organizational actorhood (Piezunka & Schilke, Forthcoming).

Consider the well-known case of Gore (the firm making Gore-Tex products), which relies on a highly organic and informal structure devoid of formal job titles, job descriptions, chains of command, written rules, or standard operating procedures (e.g., Grønning, 2016), and contrast it with a mechanistic organization like McDonald's, which documents every step of every job (e.g., for cooking: what kind of fat, what quantity of oil, how many fries, what temperature, for how long, etc.) in minute detail. Behaving in line with these structures grants organizational members legitimacy, whereas deviating from them triggers sanctions (Jepperson, 1991). As structures become formalized and explicit, individuals become increasingly replaceable; even with frequent turnover, established structures can be reliably enacted by the agents they govern (Steele & King, 2011). Formal bureaucracies lead to depersonalization, such that the rule-based organizational system, rather than the individual, steers cognition and behavior (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). In short, organizations' formal structures function as important sources of organizational actorhood (Coleman, 1974; Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2009).

These formal structures play an important role in the placement of trust (Creed & Miles, 1996; Giddens, 1984) and act on several stages of the trust formation process (Lumineau & Schilke, 2018). For one, they direct attention to particular pieces of routinely gathered information that serve as bases for trust decisions (Wuthnow, 2004). For instance, formalized procedures for assessing trustworthiness may prioritize information about a prospective partner's reputation rankings and their public track record, while leaving little leeway for other potentially relevant trustworthiness cues. Once information has been gathered, such procedures provide guidance



regarding the threshold that determines the amount of trustworthiness deemed sufficient for placing trust. Formal structures therefore shape sensemaking and give meaning to ambiguous situations, thereby directing the trust formation process (Lumineau, 2017). Similarly, formal structures and their associated decision-making mechanisms support the resulting trust behavior. This behavior may regularly deviate from an individual's personal propensity to trust in private settings, but that individual will nonetheless find it in their self-interest to behave according to formalized incentives (Barney & Hansen, 1994). Individuals unable to conform to the taken-for-granted trust standards set by these formal structures will face social and economic sanctions, including the need to find a position in an organization whose trust orientation better aligns with their own.

Formal structures thus ultimately guide the actions of organizational members toward a collective trusting stance and the behavior that arises from it (Nooteboom, 2002; Sydow, 2006). By inducing specific information-processing and decision-making mechanisms, organizational structures constrain or enable trust development in patterned ways. Formalized organizational roles and routines produce trust that is highly institutionalized (Kroegeer, 2013). Trust patterns embedded in formal structures cease to be tied to specific individuals (Zucker, 1987), becoming both objective (repeatable by other organization members without a change in meaning) and exterior (intersubjectively defined) at the level of the organization.

*Proposition 2. The more formalized the organizational structures of an organization, the stronger its actorhood as a trustor.*

Third, the pattern of social ties among organizational members can differ substantially across organizations, with important implications for how trust perceptions of external partners are formed. Here, we propose that organizations with greater intraorganizational network density will exhibit stronger actorhood as trustors. Network density denotes the extent to which all actors in a given social network—here, the trusting organization—are connected by direct relations

(Bott, 1957). Density is typically understood as the ratio of ties present in the network to the maximum number of possible ties (e.g., Ahuja, Soda, & Zaheer, 2012; Haynie, 2001). Maximum intraorganizational network density hence occurs if everyone in the organization knows and interacts with everyone else (Luce & Perry, 1949), exposing each organizational member to information and reactions from all other organizational members (Jones & Shah, 2021).

The denser the intraorganizational network, the more likely collective standards of what is considered appropriate within the confines of the organization are to develop and spread (Coleman, 1988; Krohn, 2014). A dense network conveys a clear normative order for organizational members' viewpoints and actions, offering behavioral scripts to which these members should conform (Podolny & Baron, 1997) and that they come to absorb (Granovetter, 2017). A dense network thus serves as a key condition fostering the institutionalization of a coherent stance among organizational members (Galaskiewicz, 1985). In this way, a dense network furnishes a "latent relational infrastructure" (Simons, Vermeulen, & Knoben, 2016) underlying strong organizational actorhood. In a low-density network, by contrast, individuals' attitudes are more likely to diverge, primarily stemming from their direct observations and individual proclivities rather than from interpersonal influence (Friedkin, 2004). Specifically, we argue that intraorganizational network density promotes collective trust via two mechanisms: (1) the transfer and (2) the acceptance of trust cues from the organizational collective.

First, dense networks are known to facilitate information transfer (Reagans & McEvily, 2003), especially when actors face social uncertainty (Kraatz, 1998), such as during trustworthiness assessments. If actors are densely connected, it is easier for them to calibrate their assessments based on a joint understanding of the organization's trusting stance (McEvily, Zaheer, & Soda, 2021). Various types of workplace interactions, including gossip (Burt & Knez,

1996), contribute to trust beliefs being shared within an organization. Indeed, trust formation can be a highly social process in which individual members incorporate collective understandings from their surroundings—to the extent that they are exposed to them. But the transmission of these collective understandings is contingent on the existence of ties to serve as their conduits (Burt, 2005; Soda et al., 2021). Consequently, organizational members are more exposed to shared trust understandings when embedded in a dense (rather than sparse) network.

Second, besides this “informational” social influence, dense social networks also exert a “normative” social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), in that they increase the chance for individual actors not only to become exposed to but also to accept collective trust standards. Dense networks facilitate scrutinization and the enforcement of norm abidance by members (Krohn, 2014; Peng, 2010). What is more, actors may also be inherently motivated to reach a consensus with others when they have a connection to them (De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008); if actors are closely tied to one another, they tend to avoid conflict so as to maintain harmonious relationships (Lee, Ginn, & Naylor, 2009). Conversely, sparse networks provide comparatively fewer means of observing and punishing dissenting points of view, and their members may thus be more comfortable holding deviant trust perceptions.

Our position that network density promotes organizational actorhood is in line with experimental research by Centola and Baronchelli (2015: 1989), who find that density “can cause global social conventions to spontaneously emerge from local interaction.” The homogenization process elaborated here is also consistent with DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) portrayal of “mimetic isomorphism” as a key dimension of institutionalization (cf. Marsden & Friedkin, 1993: 130), such that organizational members in a densely connected network are more likely to draw on the organization’s institutionalized trust orientation when determining the appropriate

amount of trust to place in a partner. A highly connected organization serves as a normalization device that reorients individuals' trust as they seek consistency in their assessment of the external partner. As a result, we expect greater influence from the organization, and thus a higher degree of organizational actorhood as a trustor, to the extent that the intraorganizational network is densely connected.

*Proposition 3. The greater the intraorganizational network density of an organization, the stronger its actorhood as a trustor.*

### **Drivers of the Organizational Actorhood of the Trustee**

So far, we have discussed drivers of the organizational actorhood of the trustor. Next, we turn to the trustee—the party whose trustworthiness is being evaluated. The trustor attempts to anticipate the trustee's likely actions in the relationship so as to determine the extent to which the trustor can make itself vulnerable to those actions (Cook et al., 2005; Hardin, 2002; Mayer et al., 1995). When making this anticipation, the trustor ascribes a certain level of organizational actorhood to the trustee that can range from low to high. So, under what conditions does the partner organization as a whole (rather than individual members of that organization) become the focal target of trust? To address this question, we build on the literature on entitativity, which has its roots in relational sociology (Campbell, 1958; Emirbayer, 1997) and addresses external attributions of collective actorhood (Abelson et al., 1998; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1977). Research on entitativity has a long history across disciplinary boundaries (see Brewer, Hong, & Li, 2004; Hamilton, Sherman, & Rodgers, 2004 for reviews), and it addresses one of the most fundamental questions in social cognition: when and to what extent are collectivities perceived as collectivities?

The concept of entitativity refers to the perception of a social group (here, an organization) as a single entity, distinct from its individual members (Campbell, 1958). Organizations, like other collectivities, vary on a continuum from low to high entitativity (Lickel

et al., 2000). Highly entitative organizations are perceived to possess unity and coherence (Asch, 1946), so outside evaluations focus on their collective characteristics. Evaluators tend to form a uniform cognitive representation of an organizational unit if they view it as high in entitativity. However, when an organization lacks entitativity, outsiders evaluate it in a less integrative fashion. Evaluators are then less likely to form overall organizational impressions and more likely to develop particularized judgments of individual members of the organization.

There are clear links between entitativity and the trustee's degree of organizational actorhood in interorganizational relationships. An organization to which an evaluator ascribes strong entitativity will in turn have high actorhood as trustee, because the organization (rather than its individual members) will be the center of trustworthiness judgments. If the evaluator views a partner organization as low in entitativity, however, the process of evaluating trustworthiness will be less integrated, and cues related to individual members and their trustworthiness will dominate the trust formation process.

Key properties of the target organization whose trustworthiness is being assessed can help predict its entitativity and thus the trustee's organizational actorhood. Building on entitativity theory, we suggest that the trustee's degree of organizational actorhood is a function of three drivers, discussed below: (1) the homogeneity of organizational members, (2) collective accountability, and (3) organizational stability.

First, we propose that the organizational members' apparent similarity to each other shapes the trustee's degree of organizational actorhood. Some organizations largely consist of members with homogeneous backgrounds, while others showcase considerable diversity (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987; Tsui, Egan, & Xin, 1995). The military is a prime example of an organization that consists of members with similar demographics (primarily young males) and

suppresses heterogeneity in appearance (e.g., by requiring short hair and issuing uniforms) (Hockey, 2016). In contrast, more heterogeneous organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), gather a mix of full-time, salaried employees and part-time volunteers, often with highly diverse backgrounds (Suzuki, 1998). Another illustration is Sodexo, the French food and management services provider, which explicitly outlines gender, age, and sexual orientation in its diversity hiring strategy (Anand & Winters, 2008). In interorganizational relationships, the degree of a partner organization's member homogeneity becomes most apparent during site visits but can also derive from reputational information (Roberson & Park, 2007).

The mutual resemblance among the members of an organization influences the degree to which the trustor perceives it as a coherent unit. Campbell (1958) notes that similarity, which he defines as the extent to which individuals display the same behavior or resemble one another, is a critical cue for judgments about entitativity. More contemporary empirical and theoretical work (e.g., Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Klein, Palmer, & Conn, 2000; Lickel et al., 2000) also suggests a strong association between homogeneity and entitativity. The underlying rationale is that if members of an organization appear to have similar relevant observable attributes, they are also likely to be similar in terms of other attributes, to think similarly, and ultimately to act similarly. Perceived similarity thus forms an often unconscious basis for drawing boundaries and an important cue for identifying an entity.

As McEvily, Perrone, and Zaheer (2003: 95) have argued, “the greater the perceived similarity among members of a collectivity, the more readily trust in one member transfers to trust in others” (also see Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009; Williams, 2001). Facing an organization high in unity and coherence, the trustor tends to make analogous attributions, generalizing the trustworthiness of one member to that of other members of the same

organization and ultimately to the organization as a whole. This transfer is especially supported by social categorization, which leads the trustor to form a uniform cognitive representation of members of the same group if those members share common attributes (Brewer, 1993; Pickett & Brewer, 2001). Homogeneity can thus serve as a convenient shortcut that facilitates generalizations about an organization's overall trustworthiness.

This line of argumentation suggests that the trustor generalizes the trustworthiness of one observed entity to that of a second entity if there is a high social similarity between the two (Schilke et al., 2021). For such categorical trust formation patterns to come into play, within-category similarity needs to be sufficiently high. When trustors determine that a group of actors is similar enough to justify meaningfully clustering them together, they will treat this group as a unified target of trust. Therefore, high homogeneity between organizational members projects a coherent and intelligible target of trust and creates the perception that trustworthiness assessments can be made broadly, at the level of the target organization. In contrast, heterogeneity among members is harder to interpret and more difficult to generalize to the organizational level, thus undermining the trustee's organizational actorhood.

*Proposition 4. The stronger the homogeneity of the members of an organization, the stronger its actorhood as a trustee.*

Second, we propose that the collective accountability of the members of an organization also helps explain the trustee's organizational actorhood. The collective (vs. individual) accountability of organizational members refers to the observer's "expectations that they will be held accountable as a unit" (Kou & Stewart, 2018: 35). The concept is anchored in individual-level conceptualizations of accountability (e.g., Tetlock, 1985) but adds the notion that the focal point of accountability may vary along levels of analysis.

As trust involves a decision to rely on another party under a condition of risk (Currall &

Inkpen, 2002), the trustor will attempt to predict the partner's trustworthiness (Cook et al., 2005). In this process, the trustor will consider whom to hold accountable in the event their trust is breached (Eckerd, Handley, & Lumineau, 2022; Sztompka, 1999). If the trustor expects members of the partner organization to be jointly responsible for their actions, the trustee will represent a coherent target on which the trustor places its vulnerability. Through collective accountability, actions become consequential not only for a particular recipient but for the entire organization. The organization—rather than an individual representative—must justify its actions and bears joint responsibility for them, outlasting individual actors who may pass through it (Cook & Santana, 2020). In Campbell's (1958: 18) terminology, this collective accountability causes organizational members to share "a common fate." As a result, the trustee organization appears to be a cohesive, single agent with a high degree of actorhood, as opposed to a mere collection of individuals.

In contrast, if the members of an organization do not share collective accountability and trust is breached, the trustor has to blame a specific "bad apple" without holding the whole organization responsible as a "bad barrel" (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Specific individuals will likely be held liable and wrongdoing deflected from the organization; those individuals will be the focal targets in deciding whether to place trust. In sum, collective accountability represents an important dimension for the trustor assessing a partner's trustworthiness and, in particular, the extent to which it is possible to evaluate an organization's credibility and reliability in an integrative and unified fashion.

*Proposition 5. The stronger the collective accountability of the members of an organization, the stronger its actorhood as a trustee.*

Third, we propose that organizational stability is associated with a higher degree of organizational actorhood as a trustee. By definition, stability refers to the quality of being steady



and not changing or being upset in a critical way. Some organizations tend to be remarkably stable over prolonged periods of time, such as the Japanese hotel Hoshi Ryokan, which has been run by the same family since the year 718. In contrast, other organizations appear to be in constant flux (Brunsson, 2009). An extreme case is that of transitory organizations that “bring together a group of strangers in order to complete a time-bound task via functional-based encounters” (Livne-Tarandach & Jazaieri, 2021: 1127). These temporary organizations often assemble around projects; they include special task forces, program committees, or action groups formed to handle a particular problem (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Such ephemeral organizations lack a shared work history and create limited expectations for future interactions (Bechky, 2006). They also tend to have permeable boundaries, so joining and leaving them is relatively easy (Lundin et al., 2015).

However, the organization, as a distinguishable entity, will only be truly consequential as a target of trust if it maintains a certain extent of stability in the way it is organized over time (Kroegeer, 2011). Organizations with relatively fixed key features create strong perceptions of continuity in their trustworthiness disposition. If an organization has an enduring core, this suggests intertemporal behavioral consistency and implies that today’s trustworthiness cues will likely still be valid tomorrow. Given such high consistency, the organization is a more relevant social address (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010), and the organizational level tends to be particularly meaningful in making trustworthiness judgments when organizational stability is high. However, the lack of such continuity in constantly changing organizations represents a significant source of uncertainty for the trustor. The trustee lacks a unified front projecting consistent trustworthiness, making it harder for the trustor to generalize to the whole organization. Thus, we suggest that organizational stability is an important enabling condition for the trustee’s organizational actorhood.

*Proposition 6. The higher the stability of an organization, the stronger its actorhood as a trustee.*

### **Boundary Spanners' Power as a Critical Contingency**

Our model of organizational actorhood has thus far focused on relevant drivers at the organizational level, consistent with our primary interest in explaining variations in this construct across different organizations. Nevertheless, there is considerable heterogeneity among the individuals who inhabit an organization, such that the effects of these organizational-level factors may be contingent on relevant individual-level differences. In developing this perspective, we primarily focus on those individuals serving as boundary spanners, as these are “the individuals most relevant to the implementation and management of interorganizational relationships” (Schilke & Cook, 2013: 283). Boundary spanners are individuals who connect their organization to its environment (Aldrich & Herker, 1977), represent it in interorganizational relationships (Currall & Inkpen, 2003), and process information regarding partner organizations (Perrone et al., 2003).

In particular, we have reason to believe that the amount of power held by a boundary spanner in the trustor organization will interact with the organizational actorhood antecedents we elaborated above. Following prior research across disciplines (e.g., Cook, Cheshire, & Gerbasi, 2006; Evans & Schilke, Forthcoming; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), we conceptualize power as the extent to which a boundary spanner has control over valued resources that in turn reduce his or her own dependence.

Regarding the trustor side of the dyad (i.e., the party deciding about the amount of trust to place in a partner), we argue that higher boundary-spanner power will weaken the effects of the organization's identity, formal structures, and network density on the organizational actorhood of the trustor. A powerful boundary spanner is more likely to ignore institutional pressures produced by these three drivers and instead make trust decisions more idiosyncratically, so these

drivers will not inform the boundary spanner's trust judgment to the extent that this individual has power. Adding greater nuance, this reasoning can be distilled into two distinct mechanisms: the boundary spanner's (1) allocation of attention and (2) susceptibility to normative influence.

First, the situated focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007; Pitesa & Thau, 2013) suggests that power reduces actors' motivation to pay careful attention to their immediate social environment and instead causes them to direct more attention to themselves. This differential focus of attention affects a variety of judgments, including trustworthiness assessments (McEvily, Zaheer, & Fudge Kamal, 2017; Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2015). Whereas powerful boundary spanners may largely ignore specific characteristics of their organization, less powerful individuals will carefully attend to social cues stemming from the organization's identity, formal structures, and network ties in order to gauge how much trust is to be placed.

Second, even when powerful actors are aware of social information from their organizational context, they may ultimately choose not to incorporate it in their decision making because they can afford to resist normative influence. The experience of power comes with the awareness that one can act freely, without obstruction by others or substantial social consequences (Weber, 1947). Power thus involves a considerable degree of role autonomy, which allows the boundary spanner to engage in discretionary trust behavior (Perrone et al., 2003). In contrast, boundary spanners who lack power and have less access to resources tend to be more sensitive to how they are being evaluated and what prescriptive elements their organizational context contains (Fiske, 1993), such as trust standards deduced from the identity, formal structures, and network ties of the organization. Such drivers will play a major role in shaping trust decisions when boundary spanners lack power.

To give an illustrative example, imagine Elon Musk, the founder, CEO, and product architect of Tesla, engaging in an interorganizational relationship. In this scenario, Mr. Musk will likely not (have to) care much about Tesla's identity, its formal structures, and his ties to other employees when assessing the trustworthiness of the partner organization. Now, compare this scenario to one in which a relatively low-level engineer at Tesla is put in charge of an interorganizational relationship. By comparison, this individual should be much more receptive to these institutional forces. Taken together, our argument suggests that the boundary spanner's power has a moderating impact, such that the effects of the organizational actorhood antecedents will be comparatively less pronounced when power is high (rather than low).

*Proposition 7. The greater the power of the trustor's boundary spanner, the weaker the influence of (a) organizational identity strength, (b) formalized organizational structures, and (c) intraorganizational network density on the organizational actorhood of the trustor.*

Turning to the entitativity antecedents on the right-hand side of our model in Figure 1, we argue that the power of the trustor's boundary spanner will have a similar moderating effect. This is because power influences the cognitive complexity in actors' information processing, with high-power individuals forming social evaluations, such as trust judgments, in a much more automated and less inclusive fashion (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003)—possibly because the consequences of inaccurate evaluations are less dire for them, and/or because of the myriad cognitive demands typically associated with high-power positions (Fiske, 1993; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). In particular, high-power actors incorporate significantly fewer individuating pieces of information about a target—such as a partner organization's homogeneity, accountability, and stability. Using heuristic shortcuts rather than specific observable evidence regarding the entitativity of the trustee, high-power boundary spanners may thus not discriminate as much between the entitativity of one partner organization and that of another.

In contrast, a lack of power makes controlled and deliberate social cognition more likely (Keltner et al., 2003), leading low-powered boundary spanners to more meticulously scrutinize the entitativity of each partner organization. Carefully considering relevant cues, these boundary spanners will devote significant effort to evaluating their partner in order to precisely locate the relevant locus of trustworthiness upon which they should focus their attention. This rationale is consistent with prior research showing that low-power individuals are more likely to make situational attributions, whereas high-power individuals are more prone to dispositional attributions (Brewer, 1986; Gilbert, Krull, & Pelham, 1988).<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the example of Tesla, it seems reasonable to assume that Elon Musk would devote noticeably less effort to deciphering the partner organization's entitativity based on available information about homogeneity, accountability, and stability than the rookie engineer. Overall, high- and low-power boundary spanners construe partner organizations quite differently, with the latter processing these organizations' entitativity in significantly more complex and stimulus-specific ways. This suggests that the boundary spanner's power will again play a moderating role, such that the effects of the antecedents to the trustee's organizational actorhood will be comparatively less pronounced when power is high (rather than low).

*Proposition 8. The greater the power of the trustor's boundary spanner, the weaker the influence of (a) the homogeneity of organizational members, (b) collective accountability, and (c) organizational stability on the organizational actorhood of the trustee.*

### **Reciprocal Link between Organizational Actorhood of the Trustor and of the Trustee**

The final linkage suggested by our model is between the organizational actorhood of the trustor and that of the trustee. On the one hand, we contend that actors' understanding of their

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<sup>6</sup> Note that our argument does not imply a main effect of individual boundary spanners' power on the organizational actorhood of the trustee. The view that high-power individuals' social attributions may be primarily guided by their personal dispositions but that low-power individuals also consider situational specificities rather implies an interaction pattern between power and entitativity proxies.

own organization's actorhood may spill over to their actorhood perceptions of external organizations. As a result, if trust is highly supraindividual on the trustor side of the dyad, we expect the target of trust to be high in organizational actorhood as well. When gauging a partner's trustworthiness, actors regularly engage in perspective taking, asking themselves how they would behave in the counterpart's situation (Williams, 2007). In this cognitively demanding process, they often make the (sometimes erroneous) assumption that the counterpart's situation is similar to their own (Jarymowicz, 1992; Toma, Corneille, & Yzerbyt, 2012). Consequently, boundary spanners may generalize from their own organization to the partner organization and thus project their own organization's actorhood on the counterpart, producing a positive association between the two. That is, when strong forces in an agent's organization offer clear prescriptions for how to appropriately engage with partners, this may lead this agent to believe that other organizations will possess similar agentic forces, making the partner organization a relevant locus of trustworthiness and a focal target of trust. In contrast, if boundary spanners have substantial personal autonomy to determine the amount of trust to place in an external organization, they may assume that their individual counterparts will also be the ultimate locus of trustworthiness decisions, resulting in lower organizational actorhood for the trustee.

In addition, we can envision how the relationship may manifest in the reverse direction—that is, from the organizational actorhood of trustees to that of a trustor. If external evaluators grant an organization the status of a strong actor, this may in turn cause members of that organization to adopt these external understandings in their own sense making, especially if they are repeatedly exposed to these external actorhood attributions (King et al., 2010). This line of reasoning is consistent with Coleman's (1974, 1990) discussion of actorhood, which emphasizes how external ascriptions of actorhood by society give organizations certain capacities to make

decisions that may become fact-like and widely accepted, even among internal organizational members who get influenced by these external attributions. Overall, this line of thought points to a possible reciprocal relationship between the organizational actorhood of the trustor and that of the trustee, as described by the following propositions:

*Proposition 9. The higher the organizational actorhood of the trustor, the higher the organizational actorhood of the trustee.*

*Proposition 10. The higher the organizational actorhood of the trustee, the higher the organizational actorhood of the trustor.*

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we set out to better understand the extent to which organizations, rather than the individuals within them, are likely to be the focal sources and targets of interorganizational trust. For this purpose, we introduced to trust scholarship the concept of organizational actorhood, or the degree to which an organization is perceived as a collective entity capable of purposeful behavior that is not reducible to individual agents, and we argued that this construct can apply to the roles of both the trustor and trustee in an interorganizational exchange. In addition, we leveraged micro-institutional and entitativity theory to propose a model of relevant organizational drivers of the trustor's and trustee's organizational actorhood, while also accounting for an individual-level contingency.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Our research emphasizes that interorganizational trust is not a uniform concept—and that trust researchers should embrace this complexity. Just as interorganizational trust can vary in terms of its bases (e.g., more calculative or more relational; Poppo et al., 2016; Schilke & Cook, 2015), it can also vary in terms of the involved organizations' actorhood. This insight helps build a bridge between those who emphasize the role of trust at the micro level between individual

boundary spanners (e.g., Blois, 1999; Dyer & Chu, 2000) and those who describe it as a collective phenomenon (e.g., Doney & Cannon, 1997; Sydow, 2006). Our account underlines that there is no single truth when it comes to levels of analysis of interorganizational trust; both positions are valid, albeit to different degrees in different settings. Going beyond prior multi-level approaches that made a binary distinction between trust among individuals and among organizations (e.g., Currall & Inkpen, 2002), we highlight that the organizational actorhood of the parties to a trust relationship can vary in its degree. That is, we advocate for a continuum that characterizes the locus of trust along a full spectrum ranging from highly individual to highly organizational. This approach establishes a fertile middle ground between the two extreme positions that view interorganizational trust as confined either to individuals or to organizations and allows scholars to theorize about the degree to which one or the other viewpoint dominates.

A better understanding of the loci of interorganizational trust has important implications. First, attention to levels of analysis adds substantial conceptual precision and helps avoid under-specification (Blau & Scott, 1962; Janowicz & Noorderhaven, 2006; Rousseau, 1985); findings from distinct studies are thus easier to compare and can come together to produce cumulative progress in our understanding of interorganizational trust. Armed with the organizational actorhood model, future scholars will be well equipped to theoretically justify the loci of interorganizational trust in their analyses. For those pursuing multi-level investigations, our model offers a theoretical basis for making informed predictions about the relative importance of individual- and organizational-level trust.

Second, insight into the organizational actorhood of the trust protagonists also has significant practical importance. Different degrees of organizational actorhood for trustor and trustee may come with distinct benefits and downsides. For instance, the trustor's organizational



actorhood may affect their trust accuracy—that is, the capacity to neither misplace trust nor refrain from trusting when doing so would have been beneficial (Schilke & Huang, 2018; Yamagishi, 2001). This is because an organization can accumulate knowledge relevant to trustworthiness assessments from many members, aiding in the detection of reliable partners. Further, when trust is placed at a more collective level, misperceptions among individuals may cancel each other out (Snizek & Henry, 1989; Surowiecki, 2004). At the same time, however, certain biases can actually become more pronounced at the collective level (Kerr, MacCoun, & Kramer, 1996). As a result, the relationship between organizational actorhood and the accuracy of trust is likely to be nonlinear and contingent on various situational factors. In addition to its implications for trust accuracy, the degree of organizational actorhood may affect the trustor's agility in interorganizational exchange. When trust resides at the organizational level, is deeply embedded in the organization's identity and structures, and is widely shared throughout the organization, it becomes more rigid and harder to adjust in response to environmental changes.

On the trustee side, organizational actorhood may again have important effects on the trustor's trust accuracy, both positive and negative. When trust is placed in a single individual (rather than the partner organization) and the ascribed organizational actorhood of the trustee is thus low, this particular individual may turn out to be less impactful in shaping the interorganizational relationship than assumed. There is a tendency to overestimate an individual's control (Langer, 1975; Pinker, 2008; Yarritu, Matute, & Vellido, 2014). If such overestimation of control occurs, the resulting focus on that individual will have limited predictive value for accurately predicting the partner organization's trustworthiness. However, *strong* ascribed organizational actorhood on the part of the trustee can also be detrimental to the formation of accurate trust perceptions. When they ascribe high entitativity to collectivities,

trustors are likely to form impressions based on stereotypes, consider less situation-specific information, and update their perceptions less frequently (Brewer & Harasty, 1996). Evaluators may even ignore cues that appear inconsistent with their generalized understanding of a highly entitative organization's trustworthiness (Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). Moreover, there is evidence that entitative collectivities are seen in a more rosy light than objective evidence would justify (Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, 2003).

In addition to these implications for the trustor, the trustee's organizational actorhood also has important consequences for the trustee themselves. Organizations commonly viewed as highly entitative are attributed some degree of real existence. As a result, an organization's collective reputation—understood as “outsiders’ beliefs about what distinguishes an organization” (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994: 249)—will dominate social evaluation. While a positive reputation as a reliable partner can be a blessing, a negative reputation is difficult to repair and can create an enduring competitive disadvantage (Bitektine, 2011; King, 2008).

In sum, organizations' actorhood has highly consequential effects. As a result, there is much promise in considering organizational actorhood as a variable in its own right and identifying the sources of its variation. Our paper initiates this line of inquiry by proposing an integrative model of the antecedents of the organizational actorhood of the trustor and trustee.

### **Future Research Opportunities**

The theory presented here opens up important avenues for future research—both conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, there is considerable room to further enrich our theoretical model of the antecedents of organizational actorhood. In the interest of parsimony and manageability, we have focused on factors that we believe have substantial explanatory power and match well with our focal theories for each side of the model (micro-institutional and entitativity theory), but future research should explore whether some of the factors that we have

proposed to drive the organizational actorhood of the trustor might also be relevant for the trustee side of the dyad (and vice versa) while also approaching the issue of organizational actorhood from entirely different theoretical vantage points. For instance, a systems perspective may draw attention to other types of antecedents, such as leadership, strategy, and external governance (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009), while a process perspective may further elucidate the implications of interorganizational exchange history (Schilke & Cook, 2013) for organizational actorhood in trust relations. Exchange history is critical for the development of trust (Blau, 1964; Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2013), including the evolution of its organizationality. While our model primarily adopts a snapshot perspective, we encourage future research to expand on the dynamics involved. Institutionalization and entitativity judgments take time to materialize, which is why we suspect the relationships proposed in our paper will become stronger as the focal interorganizational relationship matures and the organizations involved come to develop partner-specific routines and deeper knowledge about their counterparts.

It would also be worthwhile to consider more deeply the nature of trust along several dimensions and develop more fine-grained accounts of different types of trust when studying organizational actorhood. That is, although this article assumes that trust can travel across levels of analyses, certain types of trust may travel faster, more effortlessly, and more automatically than others. For example, cognition-based trust might be more organizational than affect-based trust (Sorenson & Rogan, 2014), even though the burgeoning literature on collective emotions (Menges & Kilduff, 2015) insists that affect can indeed reside at an organizational level. Similarly, it would be worthwhile to explore how the organizationality of trust might differ across the dimensions of ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995) or knowledge-based, identification-based, and calculative trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). Relatedly, prior

research has convincingly argued that trust and distrust may represent two distinct concepts (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998) and that their underlying mechanisms and constituent processes might differ (Guo, Lumineau, & Lewicki, 2017; Reimann, Schilke, & Cook, 2017). These observations raise the question of whether our model of organizational actorhood and trust can generalize to distrust. At this point, we can only conjecture that it might, even though there is clearly a need for a deeper (possibly comparative) analysis of the extent to which distrust and trust can be the subjects of institutionalization and entitativity judgments. Also, are trust and distrust more likely to co-exist when organizational actorhood is at intermediate levels and when different organizational factions may pull in divergent directions?

Moreover, we offered an initial discussion of the potential consequences of the trustor's and trustee's organizational actorhood, but this topic clearly warrants more attention. This new line of inquiry should also revisit what we already know about the consequences of the amount of interorganizational trust while considering the locus of this trust and how it may alter its effects. Certain associations may be more or less pronounced, depending on the degrees of organizational actorhood of the trustor and/or trustee. Furthermore, we followed most extant multi-level research on interorganizational trust by focusing on the interface between individuals and organizations. A relevant extension of our model could also consider the role of the organizational environment (e.g., Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Organizational fields and professions exert powerful pressures on organizations and their members (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), with the potential to create strong norms regarding interactions between organizations. Similarly, the formation of interorganizational trust differs notably across national cultures (Zaheer & Harris, 2006). Considerable variation in interorganizational trust may thus reside at the level of the environment, which may in turn affect the organizational actorhood of the trustor

and trustee. Further, our focus on trust in interorganizational relationships explains our interest in *organizational* actorhood, but many of our ideas could be fruitfully generalized to *collective* actorhood more broadly, thus addressing trust-related issues relevant to other collective entities, such as nations, social movements, organizational subsidiaries or divisions, and teams.

Finally, our paper has a focus on organizational actorhood as it pertains to trust, but we believe our model will also be a useful starting point for theorizing on organizational actorhood more broadly and in domains other than trust. We agree with King et al. (2010) that research on organizational actorhood, despite its roots in Coleman (1974), is still in its infancy and would benefit substantially from further elaboration of the concept and its nomological network. It is our hope that this article can serve as inspiration for this important line of organization theory.

In addition to expanding the theoretical repertoire surrounding organizational actorhood in the context of trust and beyond, we also call for empirical research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. A longitudinal qualitative approach would be particularly useful for studying the emergence of organizational actorhood as a process that evolves over time. Besides ethnographic work, we also advocate for the use of think-aloud (or protocol) analysis (Reypens & Levine, 2017), which allows studies to capture boundary spanners' interpretive processes as they make sense of an interorganizational relationship; it could thus gauge the extent to which they make trust decisions from an individual vs. organizational viewpoint and with reference to an individual vs. the partner organization as a whole.

In terms of quantitative measurement, we can recommend three approaches. First, in survey research, the organizational actorhood of the trustor may be usefully approached through a referent-shift dispersion model (Chan, 1998; Fulmer & Ostroff, 2021). The term "referent-shift" suggests that questions about trust should refer to study participants' perceptions of what

the collectivity believes, such that the organization, rather than the individual, is the reference point (e.g., “How trusting is your organization in its interorganizational relationships?”). Such measures encapsulate the collective trust and disposition of an organization, independent of individual members’ trust and dispositions. For instance, they may show that individual members personally have a low amount of trust but still recognize that the organization as a whole has strong trust prescriptions. The term “dispersion” denotes that the main interest is not in the organization-wide average of trust but in the variance—or, inversely, the consensus (de Jong, Gillespie, Williamson, & Gill, 2021; Haack, Schilke, & Zucker, 2021)—in such assessments, as an indicator of the strength of the collective property. Second, archival research can approximate trust through sources such as organizational statements or specific organizational routines pointing to open knowledge sharing, informal coordination, or expansion in scope (Currall & Inkpen, 2002; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). After capturing the amount of trust, a study could approximate organizational actorhood through a variance decomposition analysis that partitions the total variance into portions associated with the individual and organizational levels (Meyer-Doyle et al., 2019), the latter of which may serve as a proxy for the organizational actorhood of the trustor. Third, in terms of the organizational actorhood of the trustee, trust scholars can build on methods from entitativity research to develop experiments gauging the organizational actorhood of the trustor, with experimental methods providing unique insights into the causal effects in trust relationships (Schilke, Powell, & Schweitzer, Forthcoming). For example, following a prompt explaining the concept of collectivities to study participants (Lickel et al., 2000), researchers could ask them to rate a partner organization on a collectivity scale ranging from very low to very high.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, we have revisited and reframed the fundamental question of whether

organizations are able to trust and be trusted to instead consider the extent to which they can do either. We challenge the long-standing assumption that trust must be either an individual or an organizational phenomenon by proposing organizational actorhood as a concept that varies in its degree. Doing so enables us to reduce confusion and help bridge diverging conceptions of interorganizational trust. We break new theoretical ground by theorizing the antecedents of organizational actorhood and incorporating micro-sociological theory into trust scholarship. Our model draws attention to institutionalization and entitativity as key theoretical mechanisms explaining the organizational actorhood of the trustor and trustee, respectively. Our discussion highlights the implications of our model for managing, maintaining, and restoring trust. It is our hope that our project to problematize levels of analysis will advance the field's conception of interorganizational trust, increasing theoretical rigor while also offering a fertile springboard for a new line of research that reveals the contingent collective nature of the phenomenon.

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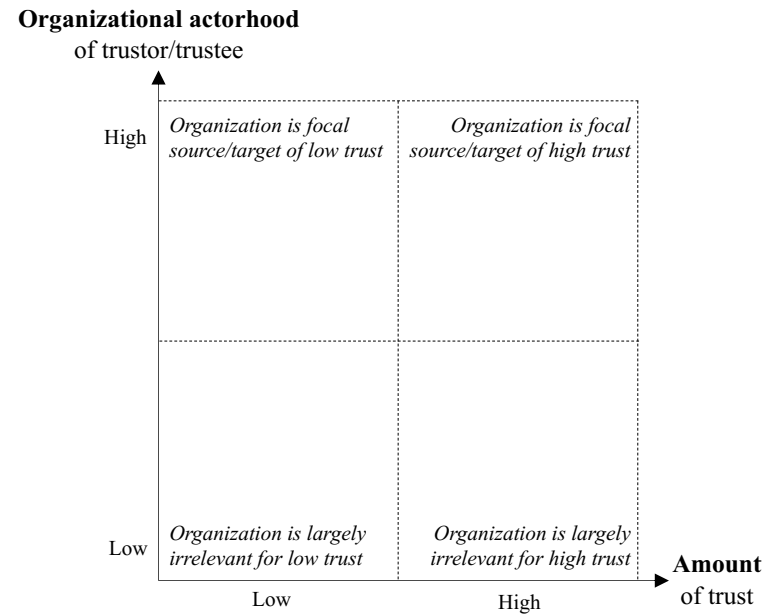
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**Oliver Schilke** (oschilke@arizona.edu) is a Professor of Management and Organizations (tenured) and a Professor of Sociology (by courtesy) at the University of Arizona, where he also serves as the Director of the Center for Trust Studies. He received his PhD from the University of California-Los Angeles. His research interests include collaboration, trust, organizational routines/capabilities, and microinstitutional processes.

**Fabrice Lumineau** (lumineau@hku.hk) is a Professor in Strategic Management at HKU Business School, The University of Hong Kong. He received his PhD from HEC Paris. His research interests include interorganizational partnerships, the interplay between contract and trust in collaborative strategies, opportunism and ethical issues, and blockchain governance.

**FIGURE 1. Orthogonal Relationship Between Organizational Actorhood and Amount of Trust**



**FIGURE 2. Integrative Conceptual Model of the Organizational Actorhood of the Trustor and the Trustee**

