Trust effects delayed gratification

Researchers were interested in how much trust weighed on individuals’ decisions to delay gratification for a greater future reward. In two studies, researchers accepted volunteers from a “pay per task” website. Using an online survey format, the study asked individuals to read vignettes with assigned computer-generated faces. The vignettes and faces were designed to be untrustworthy, neutral, or trustworthy. After reading the vignettes, participants answered a series of questions regarding their preference to accept a lesser monetary amount right away or a greater monetary amount in the future (between 10 – 75 days).

In the first experiment, 78 participants read and were surveyed on all three vignettes. In the second experiment, 172 participants received only one of the three vignettes and a larger database of computer-generated faces that have previously shown to influence trustworthiness were utilized.

In both experiments, trustworthiness was a predictor of the likelihood an individual would delay gratification. If the participant perceived the person and face as untrustworthy, it was more unlikely that the participant would delay gratification for a larger reward. Participants were more inclined to accept delayed rewards from neutral individuals, which led researchers to believe there is a minimum threshold for social trust with delayed gratification. Results from the study suggest that a lack of trust has a greater effect on an individual’s decision to seek immediate gratification than either someone viewed as neutral or trustworthy.

Practical Applications

✓ When utilizing incentives, be fair, swift, and consistent. A lack of consistency may negatively impact trust.
✓ Discuss what incentives are meaningful to probationers. This may help probationers learn to delay gratification.
✓ Establish a positive working relationship with probationers. Mutual respect and a level of trust are products of such an alliance.
✓ Elicit feedback from probationers regarding their perception of trust in you.
✓ Collaborate with treatment providers to help the probationer through past events that are hindering trust.
✓ Capitalize on opportunities to model honesty and build trust with probationers.
✓ Engage in conversations about a probationer’s choice for “some now” over “more later”.
✓ Ask about strategies (e.g. task engagement, distraction, decisional balance matrix, reminders of larger rewards) utilized by probationers to delay gratification.
✓ Be aware of facial and body gestures when working with probationers. Conflicting verbal and nonverbal messages may lead to a lack of trust.