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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Attributional sense-making of distrust in professional service firms: Working in a coopetitive paradox

Neve Abgeller[1] | **Mark N. K. Saunders**[1,2] | **Rory Donnelly**[3] | **Tony Dobbins**[1]

[1]Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

[2]Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

[3]School of Management, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

Correspondence
Neve Abgeller, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK.
Email: n.abgeller@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

Distrust is an inevitable yet often overlooked feature of relationships in professional service firms (PSFs), where simultaneous demands to collaborate and compete produce a coopetitive paradox shaping everyday organizational life. Drawing on 50 in-depth qualitative interviews using the critical incident technique, we examine how professionals attribute meaning to the development of distrust in their working relationships. The analysis identifies three recurring loci—readings of character and conduct (internal), signals from structures, processes, and cultures (external), and interactional cues in day-to-day exchanges (relational)—which often braid together into compound explanations for distrust that travel and endure. In high pressure, identity-sensitive PSFs, coopetition heightens this braiding, making small ambiguities easier to read as self-interest and harder to reverse. The study clarifies how distrust functions as an active, socially embedded process of meaning-making and why it proves so durable in coopetitive settings.

KEYWORDS

attribution theory, coopetitive paradox, critical incident technique, distrust, management consultants, professional service firms

Practitioner points

- Distrust often stems from how employees interpret colleagues' personal traits and motives, with perceived insecurity, self-interest, and ethical lapses driving negative attributions.
- Competitive and ambiguous organizational environments in PSFs can amplify distrust, as structural and cultural pressures encourage self-protective behaviours.
- Communication breakdowns, inconsistent information flows, and intuitive judgements about the intentions of colleagues can entrench distrust in working relationships.
- Addressing distrust requires interventions at both relational and structural levels—balancing performance demands with transparency, collaboration, and consistent policy adherence.
- Understanding that conflict is a structural feature of work relations, rather than being deviant or abnormal, should be the starting point for practitioners in understanding causes of distrust.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how professionals working in professional service firms (PSFs) interpret and navigate distrust in their relationships with colleagues by uncovering the attributional processes through which they assign meaning, responsibility, and blame. We focus on attributions of distrust in coopetitive settings, where collaboration occurs amid competitive rivalry and comparative evaluation (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Beersma et al., 2003). Such working environments are increasingly pervasive across contemporary organizations (Crick, 2024), presenting the need to understand how distrust is formed and how it can be managed under these conditions (Lascaux, 2020; Raza-Ullah, 2021).

In many PSFs, teamwork takes place in the context of individualized metrics, professional reputations and up-or-out career pressures. These working conditions heighten vigilance and self-protective behaviours (e.g., withholding knowledge), and over time, reinforce distrust (Connelly et al., 2019). Attribution in this context is not merely a cognitive routine but a relational practice through which professionals interpret ambiguous conduct and decide whether to collaborate, hedge, or protect themselves (Carson et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Prior research shows that this relational practice complicates coordination and knowledge flows and pulls behaviours in different directions, helping to explain why trust becomes conditional and distrust routinely anticipated—especially in performance-centric working environments (Lascaux, 2020; Spurk et al., 2019; Tsai, 2002). This makes coopetition hard for firms and individuals to manage and sustain (Abgeller, Saunders, et al., 2024; Raza-Ullah, 2020).

In this article, we focus on PSFs as conceptually illuminating contexts characterized by high levels of interdependence, ambiguous performance expectations, and client-driven pressures, which mean colleagues work together while being comparatively assessed (Braun et al., 2025; Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003). Although consultancy is often portrayed as high-performing, autonomous, and collaborative (Abgeller, Saunders, et al., 2024; Robertson & Swan, 2003), managerialist logics—performance surveillance, symbolic self-presentation, and peer benchmarking—make visibility, taking credit, and advancement particularly important (Alvesson, 2011; Klikauer, 2015). These dynamics align with broader neoliberal views casting workers as self-reliant and individually accountable for their success (Fleming, 2017), which produces cognitive and emotional strains that erode collaborative trust (Parker et al., 2001) and make attributional perceptions especially consequential for everyday working relations (Carson et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Consequently, it becomes essential to understand how professionals form and explain distrust—that is, the attributional work through which ambiguous behaviours are read as risky, intentions are inferred, and protective action is justified. Our study uses this attributional perspective to examine

how professionals construct attributions of distrust, the cues they notice, the links they draw, and the explanatory accounts they assemble.

Attribution theory has informed work on justice, performance evaluation, motivation, and organizational behaviour (Carson et al., 2024; Fousiani et al., 2025; Ni & Zheng, 2024), yet we still know relatively little about how distrust is explained inside organizations or how such explanations are assembled in situ when cooperation coexists with rivalry (Kostis & Näsholm, 2020; Six & Latusek, 2023). To address this gap, we analyse data from 50 in-depth interviews with consultants working for PSFs in the UK and USA, using Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique (CIT) to elicit richly detailed episodes of pronounced distrust. In doing so, we elucidate the complexity and messiness of lived sense-making—what cues are noticed, how alternative readings are assessed, and how power and local incentives inflect explanatory accounts—features typically obscured in survey—and vignette-based studies.

The findings contribute to attribution theory by reframing workplace distrust as an attributional accomplishment: professionals craft explanatory accounts that legitimize caution and reconfigure interaction under comparative evaluation. These accounts are not chosen from isolated 'loci' but braided across sources, linking readings of conduct to incentive structures, professional reputations and power relations, thereby embedding attribution in the organizational conditions making it salient. This braiding clarifies why brief or ambiguous episodes can travel and manifest in coopetitive settings, and why distrust, once articulated, can become sticky through corroboration and perceived inaction. Using this concept of braiding, we extend attribution theory beyond individual cognition to a context-sensitive, mechanism-first view of how explanatory work is undertaken in organizations (Carson et al., 2024; Fousiani et al., 2025). The mechanisms we identify speak to other types of coopetitive firms in different occupations and sectors, offering a portable account of how attributions of distrust take hold.

The article proceeds as follows: Next, we review literature on distrust, the coopetitive paradox and attributions in PSFs. Then we introduce our analytical framework and explain our methodology, before presenting the findings and discussing the theoretical and practical implications for managing relational complexity in professional work.

Distrust

We conceptualize distrust, sometimes also referred to as mistrust, as negative expectations about another's intentions or behaviour—anticipating potential harm, exploitation, or opportunism (Lewicki et al., 1998). Distrust is not simply the inverse of trust: research treats trust and distrust as distinct, potentially coexisting orientations with their own triggers and trajectories (Guo et al., 2017; Kostis et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2014). In organizations, distrust can coexist with pockets of trust (e.g., confidence in competences but not motives) and is asymmetric; it often forms quickly and erodes slowly, especially when cues are ambiguous and the costs of misplaced confidence are high (Dimoka, 2010; Sloan & Oliver, 2013).

Much of the organizational literature on distrust foregrounds its negative outcomes. These include knowledge concealment, reduced cooperation, and relational withdrawal—practices that narrow exposure, filter or withhold information, and recalibrate who sees what and when (Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015; Connelly et al., 2012; Sampson et al., 2019). These behaviours are often read as contextually strategic rather than purely dispositional—for example, defensive adjustments to salient reputational stakes and comparative evaluation (Connelly et al., 2019).

By contrast, work on antecedents to distrust is thinner and often highlights value incongruence—misalignments with norms or an organization's ethos—that trigger distrust (Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015; Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018). What remains under-specified is how negative expectations are assembled in real-world settings: which cues are noticed, how inferences about motives and risks are linked, and how explanatory accounts are built and sustained in everyday interactions. This explanatory gap is especially consequential in coopetitive environments, where collaboration unfolds alongside rivalry and small ambiguities carry substantial interpretive weight (David et al., 2021; Tsai, 2002). These

conditions heighten the stakes of attributions and make a processual understanding of distrust particularly urgent.

The Coopetitive Paradox and Professional Service Firms

Across many organizations, collaboration unfolds alongside comparative evaluation and rivalry. Coopetition characterizes this paradoxical condition in which actors pursue interdependent goals while also being assessed against one another for scarce rewards and recognition (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). Paradox theory reminds us that such tensions are not errors to be eliminated but persistent, conflicting demands that cannot be fully resolved (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Research shows that mixed cooperative–competitive work environments shape coordination and knowledge flows—cooperative structures support learning and accuracy, while competition drives speed and differentiation—creating interpretive pressures in day-to-day work (Beersma et al., 2003; Tsai, 2002). Competitive climates make helping more conditional and strategic as prosocial behaviours are weighed up against self-presentational costs and future claims to credit (David et al., 2021). Under such scrutiny, small ambiguities about motives or ownership acquire significance; reading them as self-interest becomes a readily available sense-making move and distrust a defensible stance.

We situate our study in PSFs, which are characterized by intra-organizational coopetition and so provide an illuminative context to explore how professionals construct attributions of distrust. In PSFs, project-based interdependence and client-driven deadlines entail close collaboration, while comparative assessment is ever-present through up-or-out career structures, business-development expectations, and professional reputations (Braun et al., 2025). These features generate a bundle of paradoxical tensions with consequences for (dis)trust: helping vs. hoarding (knowledge sharing that may empower a future rival), joint delivery vs. individual credit (a collective output but personal evaluation), autonomy vs. surveillance (self-management coupled with utilization dashboards and metricized oversight), client responsiveness vs. internal fairness (doing what the client demands vs. equitable workload and recognition), and short-term visibility vs. long-term development (billability and 'wins' crowd out learning) (Abgeller, Saunders, et al., 2024; Connelly et al., 2012; Mazmanian et al., 2013). Each tension furnishes cues that can be read as opportunism or unfairness and so everyday ambiguities provide fertile grounds for attributions of distrust (Cañibano, 2019; David et al., 2021; Raza-Ullah, 2020).

Coopetition in PSFs is intensified by managerialist logics that tether autonomy to surveillance and peer benchmarking. Professionals are expected to self-manage—becoming both agents and objects of control—while continually projecting competence and alignment with utilization targets, performance dashboards, and client feedback systems (Grey, 1996; Klikauer, 2015). Socio-ideological control works through identity and impression management rather than overt coercion, with identity regulation shaping what it means to be an 'ideal' professional (Alvesson, 2011; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Robertson & Swan, 2003). Under these conditions, uncertainties about motives, credit, or procedural fairness become diagnostic signals and attributional judgements influence decisions about when collaboration is safe and guarded self-protection is prudent. This is the context in which we examine how professionals' attributions of distrust are assembled in their day-to-day work.

Attribution theory as an analytical framework for distrust

We use attribution theory to examine how professionals explain the emergence of intra-organizational distrust. In this tradition, people are treated as intuitive theorists who construct accounts of the behaviours of others—linking observed cues to causes and motives to render social situations intelligible (Heider, 2013; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1985). This is especially pertinent when interaction is ambiguous and the stakes are high, as attribution is not only a background cognition; it also orients action.

Attribution theory has been used across a range of intra-organizational research to explain how employees interpret workplace events and the behaviour of others—spanning justice perceptions, performance evaluation, motivation, and everyday organizational conduct (Holtz & Harold, 2008; Martinko & Mackey, 2019). Recent articles in this journal demonstrate how attributional reasoning shapes affective responses to feedback and difficult interactions, linking explanatory styles to relational trajectories (Carson et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Yet, we still know comparatively little about attributions of distrust inside organizations—and even less about how such attributions are assembled where cooperation coexists with competition. To address this, we trace how professionals narrate sources of distrust under coopetitive conditions in PSFs. In what follows, we set out the methodological approach underpinning this analysis.

METHODOLOGY

To gain contextual insight into attributions of distrust, we use a qualitative, interpretivist approach that treats distrust as situated sense-making—attending to first-person accounts and organizational cues through which intentions are read (Isaeva et al., 2015). Focusing on professionals in PSFs, we employ an abductive research design that iterates between emergent patterns in the data and attribution theory to explain how cognitive, emotional, and contextual processes are assembled into explanations of distrust.

A purposive sample of management consultants was used to allow in-depth exploration of distrust among management consultants (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Senior members of two firms in the UK facilitated access to participants but did not influence the sample selection or interview process. The sample initially comprised 30 individuals and was expanded to 50 through snowball referrals. Participants were drawn from five UK consulting firms (accounting for 80% of the sample) and one US branch (20%), thus spanning two major consulting markets (Donnelly, 2015). Access to the US branch arose organically—a US-based consultant seconded to a UK project was our initial contact and, via snowballing, introduced further US colleagues; we took this opportunity to diversify the PSF sample across two major markets while maintaining our focus on PSFs. The sample was balanced in distribution across genders (50% women and 50% men), age (mean 36.3 years), role (consultant—38%, manager—32%, executive—28%), and experience (mean 13.6 years) (Table 1).

Following ethical approval, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT). We used two discrete CIT prompts focusing on distrust: an event-centred prompt asking participants to recount a specific occasion when they felt especially distrustful of a colleague (what happened, context, significance, feelings, and any shift in distrust before/after), and a person-centred prompt asking them to name someone they distrusted and explain how they arrived at that judgement, including the behaviours and cues they relied upon (see Herzberg et al., 1959 for a similar application). CIT is particularly well-suited for examining relational complexity and has been successfully employed to explore workplace dynamics, such as attribution, emotional regulation, and trust breakdown (Butterfield et al., 2005; Waring & Wainwright, 2008). Participants were invited to recount 'critical distrust incidents'—interactions or situations they identified as leading to their distrust. This enabled us to avoid overly abstract questioning while eliciting detailed accounts of attributional reasoning, emotional reactions, and contextual factors shaping their interpretations (Münscher & Kühlmann, 2015). Each interview lasted ~1 hour, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

We analysed the interviews using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coding began inductively and semantically: we stayed close to the participants' own language, labelling concrete cues, actions, and meanings they associated with distrust. Working iteratively across transcripts, we compared patterns without importing theory, attending to how accounts located the 'source' of distrust in particular people, organizational arrangements, or interactions.

As the coding progressed, the recurrent structuring of explanations became apparent. This led us to use attribution theory as an organizing lens—a deductive step used to consolidate and clarify the

TABLE 1 Participants.

Code	Gender	Age	Role	Experience in years	Code	Gender	Age	Role	Experience in years	Code	Gender	Age	Role	Experience in years
P1	M	37	Manager	13	P18	F	22	Consultant	1	P35	M	23	Consultant	2
P2	M	43	Manager	17	P19	F	36	Manager	16	P36	F	57	Manager	27
P3	F	33	Manager	10	P20	F	29	Consultant	2	P37	F	48	Executive	26
P4	M	37	Manager	12	P21	M	44	Executive	28	P38	M	33	Executive	10
P5	M	40	Manager	18	P22	M	33	Executive	11	P39	M	39	Executive	17
P6	F	27	Consultant	3	P23	F	54	Executive	30	P40	M	24	Consultant	1.5
P7	F	31	Consultant	9	P24	M	54	Executive	31	P41	M	23	Consultant	1
P8	M	37	Manager	13	P25	F	57	Executive	36	P42	M	28	Manager	3.5
P9	M	40	Manager	19	P26	F	47	Manager	32	P43	F	34	Consultant	10
P10	M	40	Manager	14	P27	F	23	Consultant	2	P44	M	32	Managerial	8
P11	M	24	Consultant	2	P28	F	40	Executive	19	P45	F	37	Executive	16
P12	F	24	Consultant	5	P29	F	42	Executive	20	P46	M	45	Executive	18
P13	F	32	Consultant	6	P30	M	34	Consultant	12	P47	F	23	Consultant	3.5
P14	F	50	Executive	30	P31	M	28	Consultant	4	P48	M	25	Consultant	4.5
P15	M	44	Executive	23	P32	F	36	Manager	18	P49	M	51	Executive	27
P16	M	26	Consultant	3	P33	F	40	Manager	17	P50	F	28	Consultant	3.5
P17	F	24	Consultant	3	P34	F	58	Manager	20					

inductive coding. We grouped the material into three overarching themes: internal attributions (comprising perceived personality traits such as insecurity, arrogance, dishonesty, and behaviours, such as career sabotage, blame-shifting, self-promotion, broken commitments); external attributions (comprising organizational structures, such as organizational inaction, tolerance of negative behaviour; cultural environments such as transactional and impersonal communication; policies; and systematic factors); and relational attributions (comprising interpersonal behaviours such as quality of everyday engagement like poor communication and lack of empathy, and intuitive judgements), while deliberately remaining open to elements that exceeded any single locus. This openness proved necessary: across many accounts, causes braided together (e.g., incentive structures cueing person inferences; power-laden interactions scaling up to system judgements; reputation loops that corroborated and accelerated suspicion). We developed a fourth, integrative overarching theme—braided attributions—to capture these patterned combinations rather than force them into discrete categories. This comprised three themes of interaction mechanisms, such as activating, generating, and reframing; intensification mechanisms; and stabilization and acceleration mechanisms.

We developed our themes and subthemes through direct comparison, team discussion, and checks for disconfirming cases. This enabled us to develop an analysis that was both grounded in participants' narratives and theoretically transparent about how attributions of distrust were assembled. The relationships between these themes and subthemes are represented in our finalized thematic map (Figure 1). Within this map, subthemes are used only where they add value (Braun & Clarke, 2022). No major differences in attribution patterns were observed across age or geography (UK vs. US), although some variation did emerge based on gender and seniority. These findings are explained in more detail in the next section.

Findings

Here we set out the four overarching themes identified in the participants' explanations of intra-organizational distrust. These are internal attributions (locating sources in a person's character and conduct), external attributions (tracing sources to structures, cultures, and incentives), relational attributions (deriving sources from the dynamics of ongoing interaction), and braided attributions (showing how these loci are woven together and escalate).

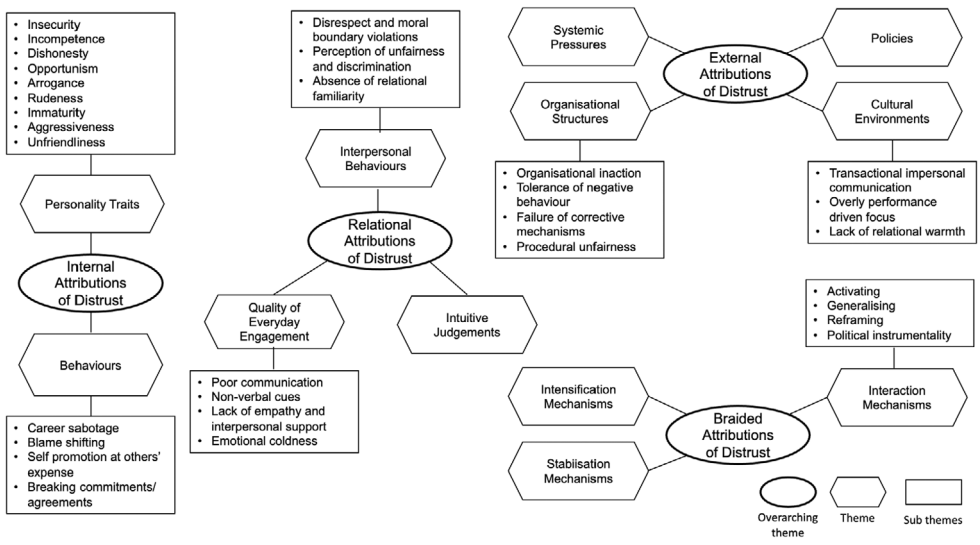

FIGURE 1 Thematic map.

Internal attributions of distrust

Internal attributions of distrust refer to how individuals attribute causes of distrust to the perceived characteristics, behaviours, and actions of colleagues. Participants framed distrust as a consequence of individual failings—interpreting the intentions of others as dishonest, self-serving, or ethically compromised. Participants often linked distrust to personality-based readings, with insecurity outlined as a trigger for self-regarding behaviour and escalation. Insecure colleagues were described as needing continual validation and 'something to bolster themselves up', which, in practice, meant they might 'do anything to get it' [P25].

Similarly, incompetence was not perceived to be merely a lack of technical skill but also a profound source of relational uncertainty. Participants worried that colleagues they viewed as incompetent could not be relied upon to fulfil responsibilities, creating vulnerabilities for teams and projects. Doubts about capability bled into doubts about whether a colleague could function as a dependable team player:

> 'I didn't ever really have much faith in his knowledge…my distrust was kind of rooted in this feeling of he is incompetent…distrusting not only him as a team player but also his skill and ability' [P27].

More significantly, dishonesty emerged as one of the most significant triggers of distrust. Participants described various signs of dishonesty, from selective truth-telling to outright deception. These behaviours disrupted their fundamental expectations of transparency and candour necessary for sustainable professional relationships. Participants indicated that the inability to ascertain whether a colleague was presenting information honestly created persistent uncertainty, making it difficult to rely on them for collaboration or decision-making.

> 'He is only saying the things that are nice to hear…rather than what is the truth. Basically, staying away from the hard facts…you never know when he is telling you the whole truth, so it's such a fundamental thing' [P30].

In some instances, participants equated evasiveness and selective disclosure with manipulation. Partial or strategically tailored communication fostered profound suspicion regarding a colleague's intentions:

> 'It's like talking to a politician…You don't believe that they're telling you the truth because they're dodging questions and spinning the story'. [P39].

Once a lie was detected, it exceeded a threshold and any benefit of the doubt collapsed. The relationship became irrecoverable, and distrust became absolute:

> 'Lying is everything…It doesn't matter what else happens after that' [P34].

The participants also identified more general negative traits—including rudeness, arrogance, immaturity, aggressiveness, and unfriendliness—contributing to an atmosphere of distrust. These traits fed into broader perceptions of questionable character, reinforcing wariness, and relational distancing. Mechanistically, these internal attributions share a through-line: dispositional readings (insecurity, incompetence, dishonesty) are converted into expectations of future harm (opportunism, failure, and manipulation).

Beyond character judgements, participants anchored attributions in observable behaviours. Deliberate, self-serving choices—such as breaching role duties or disregarding collegial expectations—became diagnostic cues that warranted distrust. One of the most striking behaviours triggering distrust was career sabotage—often enacted by superiors who controlled ratings, assignments, and visibility.

Participants recounted instances where those in gatekeeping roles deliberately undermined their advancement or chipped away at their reputation. Because these moves flowed from power imbalances, they were read as the misuse of authority: patronizing gestures (e.g., consigning someone to the worst desk) and withholding promotion support signalled exclusion and protectionism rather than fair evaluation. As one participant put it:

> 'I think she probably saw me as a threat and at that point then just kept me down in every which way she could…so in performance management it was only just about good enough, she would never support any promotion cases…I was a valuable member of the team to her, but she didn't want to recognise that' [P29].

Similarly, participants described individuals who consistently prioritized self-promotion at the expense of others as posing significant risks to them. These behaviours were perceived as patterned expressions of ethical disregard.

> 'Stepping on other people is his common characteristic…He would do everything possible to promote himself and harming other people or harming their career is not important for him in the way to achieve his goal' [P1].

Participants also mentioned behaviours—opportunistic self-promotion at the expense of others, blame-shifting (especially by managers), and breaking commitments and agreements—as clear triggers of distrust. When such behavioural patterns appeared, they curtailed cooperation, limited exposure, and avoided reliance on those actors, particularly where power asymmetries amplified the harm.

Overall participants' internal attributions cast distrust as a moral diagnosis of colleagues and their conduct: perceived traits (insecurity, incompetence, dishonesty, opportunism) and patterned behaviours (career sabotage, self-promotion at others' expense, blame-shifting, broken commitments) were read as deliberate choices prioritizing themselves over the collective. These person-centred readings located responsibility squarely with the actor, treating the risk as stable rather than situational, and justifying protective responses, such as distancing, monitoring, and withholding cooperation.

External attributions of distrust

External attributions refer to the perception that distrust stems from organizational structures, policies, cultural environments, and systemic factors rather than individual traits or motivations alone. Participants attributed their experiences of distrust to broader organizational contexts that facilitated, tolerated, or failed to manage negative behaviours, highlighting the critical role organizations play in shaping perceptions of trustworthiness and managing interpersonal relations.

Participants frequently reported that distrust, while sometimes initially triggered by individual behaviours, expanded beyond isolated relationships to encompass wider organizational structures when systems appeared ineffective or misaligned. They perceived systemic failures—rather than personal misconduct alone—to be the root of relational breakdowns, and once confidence in leadership or oversight eroded, distrust extended to the organization as a whole. We unpack how interpersonal breaches escalate into system-level distrust later in our overarching theme: braided attributions.

Organizational inaction was a particularly salient factor intensifying distrust. Participants described experiences where the absence of effective corrective mechanisms led to profound disillusionment, with the PSF failing to protect individuals or uphold their professed standards. Crucially, many of these episodes involved actors with evaluative authority (e.g., managers responsible for appraisals and promotion decisions). Power asymmetry mattered: when superiors were the source of the problem, participants looked to organizational checks and balances to correct misjudgements; where such mechanisms were weak or absent, errors persisted and distrust spread to the system itself. When problematic individuals

were allowed to persist unchecked, it was interpreted as a structural betrayal rather than an individual anomaly.

> 'This whole thing has taught me to distrust the organisation as a whole because it should have had mechanisms in place to pick up on her. Although it claims it does, it blatantly doesn't, they knew they had a problem with her, and it was never dealt with' [P29].

In this case, the problematic actor was a superior whose actions hindered the participant's progression. The perceived lack of independent redress (e.g., effective appeal, escalation, or oversight) meant her assessments were not corrected, turning a managerial failing into an organizational one.

Organizational culture was also identified as a driver of distrust. Participants described how overly transactional, impersonal, or performance-driven communication undermined interpersonal relationships and created emotional distance, thereby fostering suspicion and scepticism.

> 'I think distrust stems from the way she communicates with me, so it's always less personal, more blunt responses, very much focused on business performance' [P40].

Beyond direct interactions, participants emphasized the role of shared perceptions of distrust in an individual. When negative narratives about certain individuals circulated, they developed reputations that accelerated distrust and socially reinforced suspicion.

> 'This person has a reputation…as someone who will aggressively pursue things that suit his own interests and isn't necessarily terribly interested in helping others…I suppose, distrust is reinforced by what the others around me say and they tend to express the same sort of opinion' [P2].

Peer confirmation intensified and hastened distrust. When a participant's own negative assessments were corroborated by others, they were more likely to solidify distrust quickly and decisively.

> 'I think it was based mostly on my observations of him and also the way he managed me was very bad and I've spoken to a few of his colleagues, and they said exactly the same thing, they said yes, he's like this all the time…that naturally puts speed into distrusting someone' [P42].

Participants also situated their experiences of distrust within the coopetitive context of consulting, where collaboration is expected but competition is structurally embedded. Underlying pressures of individual visibility, client acquisition, and performance metrics fostered an adversarial atmosphere. Workplaces were described as 'cut-throat' and 'a dog-eat-dog' (P10), where you needed to 'always be thinking of your next move or the next project' (P31). As one participant noted, 'we are in the same department so naturally we are competing for the same promotion path' [P1], highlighting how career advancement routinely embeds conflicts of interest into everyday relationships. Under these conditions, even helping behaviours were approached with strategic caution, as the benefits of collaboration were weighed up against the risk of empowering a future rival. Thus, distrust was not only triggered by personal experiences or problematic individuals, but was reinforced and legitimized by organizational structures, cultural norms, power asymmetries, and coopetitive dynamics framing relationships in terms of cautious self-protection rather than mutual reliance.

Relational attributions of distrust

Relational attributions trace distrust to how people treat each other in day-to-day work. Rather than fixed traits or impersonal structures, the focus is on interaction: communication style, empathy, fairness,

respect, and small interpersonal cues. Participants repeatedly noted that these signals—especially from superiors—were read as grounds for caution and made others feel unsafe to rely on.

A frequently cited driver was poor communication. Dismissive, arrogant, or inattentive styles were read as indicators that the other party could not be relied on. Failures of communication were not treated as minor coordination issues but as relational breaches undermining respect and care. Non-verbal cues—tone, posture, facial expressions—featured prominently in these readings:

> 'You can tell by his face, by his way of talking to you, he is basically looking at you from the top, basically looking like he is giving you the favour to listen to you. And he never really listens' [P4].

Beyond communication, participants attributed distrust to aspects of interpersonal behaviours such as lack of empathy and support in day-to-day interactions. When managers or colleagues showed little regard for personal circumstances, relationships became purely transactional and instrumental—prompting withdrawal and guardedness:

> 'They simply don't care about a person or people's circumstances, so it is all about work, not about if that person has a child, if that person needs to be at home for certain reasons or that sort of thing' [P7].

Where this indifference was associated with superiors, participants noted that the cost of such coldness was amplified by the superior's control over tasks, evaluations, and opportunities. Participants described moments of explicit disrespect that shattered what remained of relational trust. These were experienced not as routine disagreement but as violations of moral and ethical boundaries governing respectful conduct:

> 'We had a very contentious and quite frankly disrespectful exchange. All the trust and/or respect I had for this person really just went out of the window in one transient moment…It was very disrespectful, and it challenged my own moral compass and my internal boundaries of respect in the workplace. They were compromised in a way that is more than professional disagreement or constructive dissention but rather just disrespect' [P32].

Such incidents were particularly consequential when the counterpart possessed hierarchical authority. This was because the threat was not only interpersonal but also consequential for future collaboration and evaluation.

Perceptions of unfairness and discrimination intensified relational distrust. Bias was read as a warning that engagement was governed by hidden prejudices rather than fairness and mutual respect:

> 'I feel like he reacted much more strongly to me standing up to him than he did to some of my male colleagues' [P45].

Participants often linked these episodes to power-laden interactions (e.g., 'standing up to' someone with influence), when asymmetric authority made biased reactions riskier and more corrosive to trust.

Finally, participants emphasized the role of intuitive judgements—especially in ambiguous or politically charged environments. Even without definitive evidence, subtle misalignments in relational behaviour triggered gut feelings of potential untrustworthiness, which participants relied on when formal cues were weak or opaque:

> 'We all form human judgements pretty quickly about whether or not someone is trustworthy. Sometimes if we deem them untrustworthy, we don't quite know why, it's more of a feeling than a scientific process, sometimes that's clearly unfair, it's always going to

> be, but you can't really define our innate human reactions. So, I've learnt increasingly to slightly go with my gut…I tend to get more things right in personal judgements than I get wrong. So that tells me that normally I should just trust my instincts on things'. [P46].

Taken together, these insights reveal relational distrust is constructed cumulatively—through patterns of communication challenges, disrespect, emotional coldness, lack of support, perceived bias, and intuitive discomfort. In PSFs, where there is ambiguity and asymmetries in power, relational distrust becomes an understandable, often precautionary response to the risks embedded in everyday organizational life.

Braided attributions

Across accounts, participants did more than place blame on a person, the system, or the relationship; they linked these loci in patterned ways that produced and escalated distrust. Rather than conceptual overlap, we see interaction mechanisms—external cues (incentives, structures, reputational climates) that activate internal readings of character; internal judgements of bad actors that extend upwards when processes appear permissive; and power-laden relationships reframe the very same behaviours as threats. In PSFs—where visibility, credit and advancement are tightly interwoven—these braids are not incidental; they are the everyday grammar of sense-making under coopetition.

Participants explicitly tied incentive architectures to inferences about a colleague. As a participant put it, 'I thought deeply about the pay differential between a director and a partner. Does that engender the right kind of behaviour? … I have seen from a number of directors wishing to make that jump… they will sometimes do it at the expense of other people. And that is where mistrust comes in' [P8]. Here, the up-or-out career system primes a *trait* reading (opportunism), collapsing the external and internal into a single explanatory move.

When leader behaviour violated expectations of candour or follow-through, person-focused attributions commonly escalated to distrust of the organization per se: 'This [distrusting the superior] also made me distrust the whole organisation and the whole structure' [P3]. Indeed, a bad-actor judgement (duplicity, broken assurance) becomes evidence of systemic permissiveness—'if this stands, the system tolerates it'. This is the Internal *to* External braid. Crucially, the power configuration in P3's comments above heightens that move: the focal actor was a senior person (not always the direct supervisor) whose informal, face-to-face reassurances were later contradicted. This mismatch (private positivity, public negativity) signalled more than inconsistency as feedback may be shaped by opaque committees rather than performance outcomes. Even though the participant later presented evidence, and the rating was moderated, the damage to trust persisted. The participant's language ('upset and shocked'; 'lose respect'; 'demotivated') shows how a relational breach with a senior evaluator became a structural inference about the reliability of appraisal processes and the fairness of promotion governance. In short, the conditions that enable this generalization to the firm-level are: (1) role authority over consequential outcomes, (2) discordance between informal signals and formal decisions, and (3) perceived political stakes (e.g., seniors advancing their own standing). Together, these transform an interpersonal violation into an organization-level attribution of untrustworthiness. (Consistent with this, other accounts described absent or ineffective checks and balances at the organizational level; see the quote from P29 in the External Attributions overarching theme).

Power and local norms intensify these braids. Communication that might be shrugged off by peers can be read as relational unsafety by evaluators or gatekeepers, and blame-shifting from seniors is read as a role breach rather than a mistake. Two participants captured this escalation neatly: 'When he basically blamed me for something I hadn't done, at that point I pretty much wrote him off as a manager…' [P23]; 'The guy was pretty senior, and he blamed it on the most junior person on our team… If something goes wrong with a client…the manager takes the hit even if it's not his fault' [P45]. Power reframes

familiar behaviours—bluntness, opacity, scapegoating—into signals of moral hazard, so internal, external, and relational readings combine.

Finally, reputation loops stabilize and accelerate these patterns. Participants described how circulating talk and corroboration turned single episodes into enduring facets, making distrust fast and sticky relative to trust—especially in consulting contexts where placement and staffing are reputation-sensitive. (An illustrative corroboration appears in the comments of P2 and P42 in the external overarching theme).

Taken together, these data show that professionals do not simply choose between internal, external, or relational attributions; they assemble them. Incentives and visibility cue inferences about a person (external to internal); bad-actor readings scale up when processes look permissive (internal to external); power reframes norm breaches into threat (relational multiplied by power); and reputation work cements distrust. This mechanism-first view extends attribution theory from loci to braids—explaining why, under coopetition, distrust can travel quickly and endure even when events are ambiguous or 'small', whereas trust typically accumulates slowly and conditionally.

DISCUSSION

This study advances understanding of intra-organizational attributions of distrust—how professionals notice cues, ascribe intent, and assemble explanatory assessments about risk in their working relationships in PSFs. Our findings show how participants organized their sense-making around three loci—internal (readings of a person), external (systems, structures, cultures), and relational (interactional dynamics)—and that these loci often interlock under conditions of visibility and accountability gaps. In many of the participants' accounts, attributions braided together: contextual cues (e.g., incentives, structures, reputational climates) activated inferences about colleagues, and judgements about colleagues scaled upward when organizational processes appeared permissive, producing compound explanations that travelled and endured. Conceptually, this extends attribution theory beyond individual cognition by demonstrating how attributions are composed as context-embedded, braided explanations in everyday work. This analysis situates distrust within intensified neoliberal competition that encourages perceptions of individuals as human-capital(ists) and normalizes self-presentation, surveillance, and peer benchmarking, heightening the plausibility of suspicious interpretations (Alvesson, 2011; Fleming, 2017; Monbiot & Hutchison, 2024). The findings show why, in coopetitive contexts, distrust is not incidental but a durable interpretive stance—one that organizations must grasp to manage collaboration where competitive comparisons are structurally and culturally internalized and built-in.

Our analysis identifies a wide range of attributions; one locus concerns another party's characteristics and conduct as internal attributions. Distrust is anchored in perceptions of character (e.g., dishonesty, opportunism, insecurity) and in specific behaviours (e.g., blame-shifting, career sabotage, breaking commitments), treating these not as mere professional shortcomings but as ethical breaches. This moral emphasis reflects the context of PSFs, where reputation, client confidence, and being the 'ideal professional' make integrity a core professional currency (Alvesson, 2011; Empson, 2021). It also aligns with established accounts that intra-organizational trust judgements rest heavily on ability, benevolence and integrity (Abgeller, Saunders, et al., 2024; Mayer et al., 1995), with integrity violations being especially damaging and difficult to repair (Bachmann et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2004). What is striking in our data is how far this moral perception travels: even concerns labelled as 'competence' were frequently interpreted through questions of honesty and fairness, such that perceived skill gaps were refracted as doubts about candour, accountability, or motives. Coopetitive conditions heighten the interpretive weight of integrity cues—comparative evaluations and reputational interdependence make small ambiguities easier to read as self-interest and harder to reverse (Bengtsson et al., 2018; David et al., 2021). In short, integrity supplied the dominant basis for internal attributions, with ability complaints often folded into broader distrust.

Our findings also show that external attributions locate sources of distrust in organizational arrangements—structures, routines, and cultural norms that shape day-to-day work in PSFs. Participants described how tolerance of harmful behaviours, a lack of leadership intervention, and hostile or impersonal cultures made distrust a logical and even necessary response. These were read not as isolated oversights but as systemic contradictions. Managerialist norms that emphasize visibility, chargeability, competitiveness, and quantifiable performance metrics amplify relational insecurities (Klikauer, 2015; Mazmanian et al., 2013). Consequently, distrust becomes embedded not only in personal experiences but in occupational and organizational cultures marked by ambiguities and contradictions (Abgeller, Bachmann, et al., 2024; Empson, 2021).

A salient feature of external attributions was the role of the internal competitive environment in PSFs. Participants described how intense systematic pressures to secure projects, maintain visibility, and achieve advancement fostered environments where colleagues were simultaneously collaborators and competitors. Even colleagues perceived as professionally capable could engage in behaviours aimed at career sabotage—blocking promotion opportunities, undermining credibility, or withholding support—if others were viewed as a threat. These dynamics rendered distrust not simply a reaction to interpersonal slights but a rational adaptation to institutionalized norms of rivalry (Braun et al., 2025; David et al., 2021). In other words, managerialist metrics translate coopetition into day-to-day signals that fuse structural cues with motive attributions, making cautious interpretations stick.

Participants emphasized how distrust was generated and amplified through third-party information and collective reputational cues. Judgements about a colleague drew not only on personal encounters but also on peer narratives, warnings, and shared assessments circulating in the organization. This indicates that—like trust—distrust is socially embedded: relational evaluations are continually negotiated and reinforced within organizational networks (Cook & Santana, 2020). In tightly networked, high-pressure PSFs, where reputational capital is paramount, indirect information becomes a critical currency for gauging relational risk (Abgeller, Saunders, et al., 2024; Ferrin et al., 2006). Once a reputation for breaching normative expectations—for example, unfairness, dishonesty, or confidentiality lapses—took hold, it spread quickly through these networks, colouring broader perceptions and sharply limiting the scope for repair.

Relational attributions extended these patterns by showing how everyday interactions—especially communication, perceived fairness, and (lack of) empathy—became immediate grounds for distrust. In the context of coopetition, exchanges are coded as both collaborative work and competitive signalling: blunt feedback can read as status assertions, selective disclosure as information hoarding, and cool professionalism as social distancing rather than neutrality (Bengtsson et al., 2018; David et al., 2021). In the symbolic and performative milieu of PSFs—where identity is continually projected and appraised amid performance ambiguity—micro-cues in tone, turn-taking, and acknowledgement acquire heightened meaning (Alvesson, 2011; Robertson & Swan, 2003). Power asymmetry sharpens these readings: when superiors who act as gatekeepers control staffing, ratings, and visibility, small interactional slights carry career consequences (Kitay & Wright, 2007). Thus, coopetitive conditions magnify the interpretive weight attached to interactions, making relational breaches highly consequential for how risk is read and how caution becomes justified.

Many of the participants' accounts revealed how internal, external, and relational attributions were braided into a single, self-reinforcing explanation for why caution was warranted. One recurrent sequence moved from external to internal: comparative evaluation and accountability gaps primed moralized readings of character, so behaviour that might otherwise be neutral was decoded as self-serving. Put differently, managerialist logics supply the connective tissue: the same metrics and comparative routines that structure work also legitimize—and stabilize—compound explanations that travel from person to process and back. A second ran from internal to external: once a focal actor—often a supervisor—was judged to have breached role obligations, the absence of remedial action was read as organizational tolerance, scaling distrust from 'a bad actor' to 'an unreliable system'. In this way, distrust initially directed at an individual—especially a gatekeeper—spreads to

leadership and process, signalling a perceived failure of systemic integrity (Kramer, 1994; Lewicki et al., 1998; Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018).

Power asymmetries and reputation work intensified these connections. The same communicative move (e.g., selective disclosure, brusque feedback) carried different meanings when enacted by those controlling ratings, staffing, or visibility; relational cues fused with internal judgements about motives and external judgements about permissive systems. Peer corroboration tightened the braid: conversations and shared assessments converted tentative readings into organizational 'facts', making reversal difficult once narratives were established. Coopetitive conditions magnified each step—comparative scrutiny raised the stakes of small ambiguities, and gaps in oversight allowed individual breaches to escalate into system-level conclusions. The result is a mechanism for how distrust accelerates and sticks in PSFs: external cues activate internal readings; internal breaches are scaled to external conclusions; relational signals mediate and amplify both.

By applying attribution theory, this study reveals how professionals interpret and construct distrust through attributional processes embedded within complex organizational environments (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Hewett, 2021). Rather than treating distrust as a mere breakdown of interpersonal bonds or solely as a reflection of organizational dysfunction, the findings highlight that distrust arises through active sense-making about individual behaviours, relational experiences, and broader systemic conditions. Distrust emerges not as a random or irrational reaction, but as a situated and meaningful response to perceived breaches of expectations, inconsistencies between organizational rhetoric and lived experience, and relational signals that individuals must continually navigate. These attributional processes are shaped by the structural ambiguities, identity pressures, and managerialist logics that characterize PSFs (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Empson, 2021). Ultimately, distrust in PSFs must be understood not only as a rational, and at times, adaptive response to systemic contradictions (Cañibano, 2019; Mazmanian et al., 2013), but also as an interpretive act embedded in everyday professional life. In recognizing distrust as an active, situated process of meaning-making, we move closer to understanding its persistence and profound implications for professionals.

Theoretical Contributions

This article extends attribution theory by foregrounding attribution-as-composition in organizational settings. We retain the internal–external–relational loci as core lenses and show that professionals in PSFs often produce braided attributions: contextual cues (incentives, structures, reputational climates) are braided with person-level readings and interactional signals to form compound explanations that travel and persist. Conceptually, this shifts from a predominantly individual cognitive–affective view to a context-embedded, compositional account of explanatory work in ultra-competitive neoliberalized work environments where comparison and evaluation are routine (Alvesson, 2011; Fleming, 2017; Monbiot & Hutchison, 2024). The braided construct captures the blurred, messy realities of organizational life; loci remain analytically distinct yet link in practice as people justify caution and calibrate cooperation amid visibility and accountability gaps.

Furthermore, we extend attribution theory to intra-organizational distrust in PSFs, responding to calls to broaden its application (Martinko & Mackey, 2019). Prior work links attributional reasoning to behavioural and relational outcomes (Wang et al., 2024); our abductive, qualitative approach shows how attributions are composed in context—sequencing cues, tracing the linking moves from conduct to motive and risk, and locating the influence of power, impression management, and local incentives as explanations are built, contested, corroborated, and stabilized across episodes. In doing so, qualitative inquiry reveals the subjective, emotional, and situational textures of attributional sense-making that are hard to observe in decontextualized, variable-centred designs often associated with positivist or non-critical traditions (Clegg et al., 2004; Francis & Keegan, 2020; Isaeva et al., 2015), clarifying how attributions of distrust take shape and endure in everyday professional life.

For intra-organizational distrust, we recast distrust as situated interpretive work rather than a mere interpersonal breakdown or generic system failure. We specify when internal readings of character (especially integrity) dominate, when external readings of process and structure become salient, and how relational cues in coopetitive encounters tip judgements toward caution. Crucially, we show when and why these loci interlock, yielding durable accounts that travel from a focal actor to the system, or from system signals back to person-level suspicion. In PSFs—where human-capital logics, peer benchmarking, and self-presentation are normalized—such braids are credibility-enhancing and help explain the persistence of distrust even after focal incidents pass (Abgeller, Saunders, et al., 2024; Empson, 2021).

Our analysis also advances theorizing of the coopetitive paradox. We show attributional sensemaking as the mechanism that renders simultaneous cooperation and competition psychologically legible: mixed designs and continual comparison make small ambiguities in motive, credit, and process carry outsized weight, tipping judgements toward caution (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Beersma et al., 2003; David et al., 2021). PSFs offer an analytically illuminating instantiation of coopetition—project interdependence alongside continual comparison—where contextual cues (incentives, reputational climates, accountability gaps) braid with person- and interaction-level readings to produce durable, travelling attributions of distrust (Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). Similar attributional dynamics are likely to arise wherever organizations institutionalize competitive comparisons within collaborative work, inviting comparison beyond PSFs—across private, public, and third-sector settings—to examine how intensified managerialist and neoliberal logics intersect with collaboration to shape the emergence, spread, and persistence of distrust (Cañibano, 2019; Fleming, 2017).

Practical implications

The findings highlight the need for organizations—particularly those navigating the coopetitive paradox of simultaneous collaboration and competition—to identify and address the structural and relational conditions fostering distrust. A key implication lies in leadership practice: leaders must exemplify integrity and transparency while also intervening decisively when behaviours associated with distrust—such as blame-shifting, career sabotage, or exclusion—emerge. Inaction risks escalating not only interpersonal distrust but also broader organizational-level suspicion, where individuals begin to question the ethical and procedural integrity of the firm itself (Kramer, 1994; Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018).

HR professionals should critically assess competitive incentive systems that serve to reinforce individualism and reduce psychological safety. When promotion pathways and performance reviews emphasize zero-sum outcomes, individuals become more likely to adopt defensive reasoning and relational cynicism (David et al., 2021; Klikauer, 2015). Designing work and reward systems to promote fairness, transparency, and collaborative behaviours can help reduce attributional suspicion and support trust-enhancing dynamics (Parker et al., 2001).

Given the central role of third-party information flows in sustaining distrust, organizations must attend to the social architecture of communication and employee voice (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Informal warnings, reputational cues, and shared narratives often circulate beneath formal oversight mechanisms, reinforcing attributional assumptions (Ferrin et al., 2006; Granovetter, 1985). Mechanisms such as transparent employee voice provisions, confidential reporting channels, peer mentoring, and cross-hierarchical feedback loops can address relational concerns before they develop into distrust.

HR practices should also support attributional awareness. Since interpretations are shaped not only by structure but also by perception, training initiatives that build sensitivity to attributional biases, emotional dynamics, and relational cues can reduce the likelihood of misjudgements escalating (Wang et al., 2024). Importantly, such efforts must be coupled with procedural clarity, consistent policy enforcement, and safeguards against unchecked internal rivalry.

By understanding distrust as a multilevel interpretive process rather than a mere behavioural problem, organizations can move beyond compliance-oriented approaches. Most significantly, HR actors need to better understand the root causes of distrust and dissent and acknowledge that conflict is

a normal structural feature of work relations, rather than being deviant and abnormal (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2022; Fox, 1974). This understanding would enable HR actors to implement HR systems that do not support and reward 'hypercompetitive individualism' (e.g., potentially divisive HR practices like high levels of individual performance-related pay (PRP)) and instead foster more collective and humanistic HR systems that put the 'human' back into HRM (see Gold & Smith, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This article has advanced understanding of intra-organizational distrust in PSFs by revealing how professionals attribute distrust not simply to isolated interpersonal breaches, but to a 'braided' constellation of internal, external, and relational factors embedded within highly competitive, ambiguity-laden work environments characteristic of neoliberal managerialism. Through a qualitative, attribution-focused analysis, we have shown how distrust is an interpretive and socially situated process—shaped by both external forces and organizational cultures that prioritize performance, self-presentation, and competition. These insights offer a conceptual shift from viewing distrust as irrational or episodic to understanding it as a normative, patterned and meaning-laden response to systemic occupational and organizational contradictions (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018).

In extending attribution theory to the subjective and emotional construction of distrust in PSFs, this study adds to calls for more interpretive applications of psychological frameworks in organizational research (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Wang et al., 2024). Moreover, the findings highlight the need for future research to examine how attributional dynamics of distrust influence not only internal relationships but also external stakeholder interactions, leadership development, and individual well-being (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019; Qiao et al., 2025). Finally, by locating attributional processes within the theoretical lens of a coopetitive paradox, this study opens new avenues for exploring how organizational tensions between collaboration and competition shape interpersonal risk, relational judgement, and emotional regulation. This transferability of theoretical insights could be applied to very different occupations. Because the mechanism rests on interdependence under comparative evaluation, it should travel to high-stakes, reputation-sensitive arenas—such as surgical teams, software squads, classrooms, and chambers—where gatekeeping, visibility, and performance metrics are endemic. In such settings, the same sequences we identify—external cues priming person-readings, person-breaches scaling to system judgements, and relational signals binding them—are likely to pattern how distrust forms and endures.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Neve Abgeller: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; validation; visualization; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration. **Mark N. K. Saunders:** Methodology; validation; visualization; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; conceptualization. **Rory Donnelly:** Methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; conceptualization. **Tony Dobbins:** Methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; conceptualization.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Neve Abgeller https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8952-7850

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