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Generalized trust and diversity in the classroom: A longitudinal study of Romanian adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Generalized trust, the faith we place in strangers, is a fundamental attribute of democratic societies. We investigate the development of generalized trust using survey data collected from Romanian high school students within a multi-level, panel research design. We find that diversity in the classroom, defined through ethnic and socio-economic differences, has negative effects on generalized trust. Associational membership interacts indirectly with diversity, counteracting the negative impact of ethnic diversity but reinforcing socio-economic distinctions. The findings support cultural theories of generalized trust and point to the potentially positive role educational policy might play in encouraging trust among youths.

Generalized trust is the faith you place in people who you do not know. Trusting strangers increases the possibilities that groups will overcome collective action problems and encourages cooperative behavior among people who do not otherwise have a relationship (Coleman, 1990; Newton, 1999; Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002). In addition, generalized trust has been shown to serve as a bond that enhances social cohesion, bringing and keeping people together with a sense of community (Marschall and Stolle, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner, 2002; Woolcock, 2001). Generalized trust contributes to a host of other desirable outcomes such as encouraging norms of reciprocity, tolerance, and civic morality, all of which are necessary features of good governance under democratic institutions (Letki, 2006; Sullivan and Transue, 1999). Beyond good citizenship, improvements in group task orientation and completion are additional dividends associated with generalized trust (Colquitt et al., 2007).

In the early stages of post-communist democratization in Eastern Europe, levels of generalized trust were low relative to Western countries. Evidence suggests that legacies of the former regimes (Newton, 1999; Uslaner, 1999; Völker and Flap, 2003) and effects from the transitions (Letki and Evans, 2005; Muller and Seligson, 1994) account for this poor starting position. Levels of generalized trust have not caught up as expected and Romania has been emblematic of this trend (Delhey and Newton, 2005; Voicu, 2005).

The present study contributes to an explanation for the persistence of low generalized trust in Romania. Evidence suggests that within contexts of diversity, generalized trust is difficult to develop (Dinesen and Sønderskov, 2012). We test this assertion among Romanian high school students. Inter-ethnic conflict in Romania has resulted in occasional flare ups. Current adolescents are among the first generation to have been born into the post-communist context. As such, this population offers a potential glimpse of what we might expect regarding trust and social cohesion in Romania.

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Using panel data, we estimate how generalized trust is impacted by two forms of diversity: ethnic diversity and income diversity. Most studies that have considered the effect of ethnic diversity are concerned with diversity as manifested through an immigrant population interacting with a historically homogenous host population (Dinesen, 2011). Diversity in Romania is characterized as the interaction among the ethnic Romanian majority and historic minorities in the country: ethnic Hungarians and Roma. Thus, our study expands the notion of ethnic diversity usually analyzed as a factor influencing generalized trust. We also expand the notion of diversity to include socio-economic differences. Income inequality has been shown to negatively affect generalized trust at a society-level (Uslaner, 2002) and at the neighborhood level (Leigh, 2006). We consider inequality at the more intimate level of the classroom.

Although parents provide the strongest force in childhood attitudinal development, schools are an important setting for how those attitudes further develop and become applied in the absence of direct parental influence (Andolina et al., 2003; Niemi and Sobieszek, 1977). In addition, relationships between ethnic diversity and out-group relations are more likely to be struck and sustained at the mezzo level of analysis, in this case the school (Dinesen, 2011; Forbes, 1997). Educational institutions may hold the key to increasing trust in Romania since education is at the foundation of a universal welfare state and thus, provides an opportunity for policy intervention (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005, 72).

1. Conceptualizing and measuring trust

Generalized trust, or faith that we place in strangers, is analytically distinct from "knowledge-based trust," which requires information about a person before we trust him or her (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994). Knowledge-based trust depends on information gained directly from contact with people we know well, for example relatives, friends, or co-workers, and allows trust to develop through strategic calculations. Alternatively, information might be indirect and extend to certain attributes we share with others, such as ethnicity or religion. Strategic calculations are still used but these are based not on direct experience but on expectations we hold about in-group solidarity norms of reciprocity and good-faith, resulting in what is referred to as particularized trust. Generalized trust is different than either strategic or particularized trust because it does not presume prior knowledge or expectations based on identity factors.[1] Instead, generalized trust is said to serve as a bridging mechanism across social boundaries that, among other things, will transcend the potentially negative consequences of social diversity (Putnam, 2000, 22–24). Moreover, there is wide acknowledgment that generalized trust matters most for "getting things done" since it spans the broadest reaches of the moral community, and as a result, is more relevant for overcoming collective action dilemmas (Uslaner, 2002).

The decision to trust strangers is more than the result of simple rational calculations based on past experiences when others were trustworthy (Aumann and Dreze, 2005). Generalized trust is the result of a blending of direct and indirect experience, knowledge about norms of behavior, and a fundamental attitudinal disposition (Jefferies, 2002, 133; Freitag and Traunmüller 2009). Scholars have termed this personality-based form of trust differently including moral trust (Uslaner, 2002, 2006), dispositional trust (Kramer, 1999), generalized trust (Dinesen, 2010), and trust propensity (Mayer et al., 1995). Despite the names, all suggest that individuals create a filter that alters personal interpretations of others' actions so that our own observations are "theory-laden" (Grovier, 1994, 174). Thus, people who are trusting retain the dispositional component of generalized trust even after trustworthiness can be inferred through experiences. Colquitt et al. (2007) show through meta-analysis that trust propensity is the key driver of a cognitive "leap" beyond the expectations that reason and experience alone would warrant, affecting trust independently from other information that would suggest trustworthiness.

Measuring generalized trust is anything but straightforward. Survey-based studies of generalized trust normally measure the concept with the question, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" The responses are recorded either on a binary scale, such as the General Social Survey or the World Values Survey, or on an 11-point Likert scale, such as the European Social Survey. Several validity problems are associated with these variants of the trust question since it leaves a number of crucial interpretations to respondents. If we consider trust to be a relationship where *A* trusts *B* with respect to some specific *x*, the commonly-used trust questions are underspecified. Respondents must fill in their own specifications regarding the general context through which *B* is perceived and the nature of *x*. Such specifications may or may not vary among individual or groups of respondents.[2]

Assessments of measurement validity with regard to the standard survey-based trust questions focus on the equivocacy of the "most people" frame. Making reference to most people when asking about generalized trust may unintentionally lead respondents to think about the trust they have in people like them, not strangers who transcend lines of social diversity (Reeskens and Hooghe, 2008; Delhey and Newton, 2005). At the same time, the standard question of generalized trust likely elicits responses regarding the extent to which the respondent perceives another as a member of one's self-defined "moral community" (Uslaner, 2002). This community could include mostly people who are similar to the respondents, or could be broader, including people about whom the respondent has no information. If the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of people's moral communities varies, this makes responses difficult to compare. If the variance includes how one evaluates trust in a context of social diversity, then we should expect diverging findings as to the effects of a diverse context on generalized trust.

[1] Uslaner (2002, ch.3) provides a full discussion of the distinctions among strategic, particularized, and generalized trust.

[2] Stolle et al. (2008) use an experimental model so that the measure of trust can be more fully linked to diversity and other aspects of context.